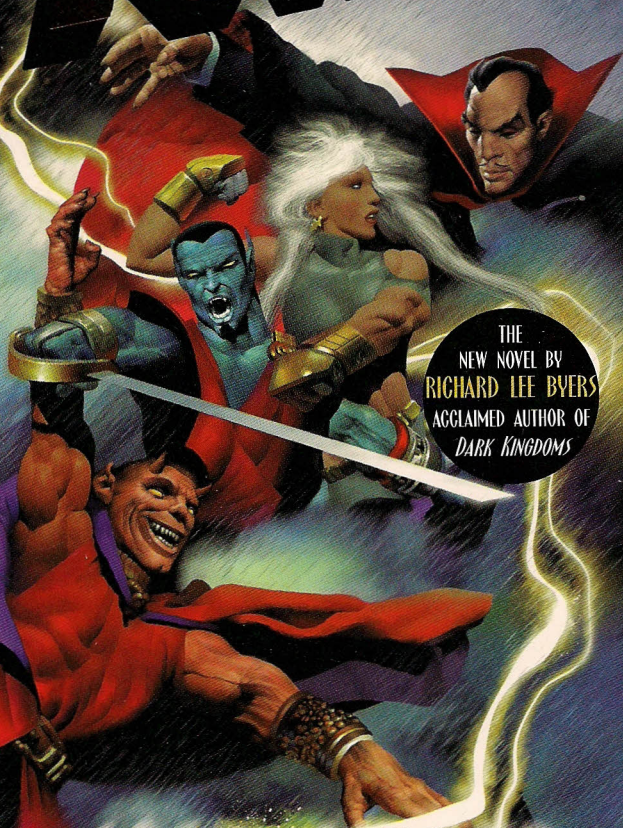
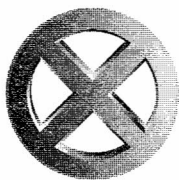


THE DOUBLE THREAT OF DRACULA AND BELASCO!



THE
NEW NOVEL BY
RICHARD LEE BYERS
ACCLAIMED AUTHOR OF
DARK KINGDOMS

SOUL KILLER



CHAPTER 1



Helen Purvis wanted to feed. The thirst seared her throat and kindled a fever in her mind. She studied her brothers and sisters, a dozen lean, pale shadows gliding restlessly about the nave of the derelict church, and saw that many of them were hungry as well. Their need was manifest in the crimson light that flickered in their eyes and in the way they bickered, snarled, and hissed at one another. Evidently the psychic summons had taken the entire coven by surprise, whereupon everyone had rushed to the gathering place without delay.

“And of course, now that we have, he leaves us cooling our heels for hours,” said Carla Spelvin. “Typical.” She was a lithe, lovely brunette with big green eyes, a former model who had no doubt been irresistible to men even before her transformation added to her allure. With her stooped, angular figure, lank, mousy hair, and pinched, sallow face, Helen had envied such beauties in her previous existence. But her own empowerment had rendered such feelings absurd, as irrelevant to the creature she’d become as her boring secretarial job, her cramped efficiency apartment, or her pet Siamese cat and only friend, named Mel Gibson, whom she’d torn apart to celebrate her metamorphosis.

She hoped to stalk and kill the human Mel Gibson someday. It seemed as if it would be a lot of fun.

She wasn’t particularly surprised that Carla had seemingly read her thoughts. Beings like themselves perceived all manner of things that were hidden from mere mortals. “Absolutely typical,” Helen agreed. “Another way of reminding us who’s boss.” She grinned, exposing her aching fangs, which kept trying to lengthen of their own accord. “I suppose that if we

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wanted to show him that he can't treat us so cavalierly, we could leave and go hunting."

Carla laughed. "Good idea," she said, "except that I like my skeleton where it is. Gordon certainly didn't seem very happy without his. So I'm afraid—" Her head pivoted toward the front of the church. "Hey, he's here!" Helen turned.

The grimy stained-glass windows at the rear of the apse still depicted scenes from the life of Christ, but the coven, acting under their master's direction, had replaced the rest of the sacred imagery in the area with abominations. A reeking, maggot-infested corpse drooped from the big oak cross, which now hung upside down. Monstrous marble statues—scaly, tentacular figures so convoluted and alien that it hurt the eye simply to look at them—flanked the new altar, a massive basalt block carved with hieroglyphs and encrusted with the dried blood of human sacrifices.

Behind the altar stood the master, a figure as unholy as the furnishings, for he looked like the devil incarnate. A tall man in a scarlet tunic and cloak, he had reddish skin, stubby horns, pointed ears, talons, and a tail. A long, straight sword with a golden hilt hung at his hip. Even from thirty feet away, Helen could feel the dark magic crawling in the blade.

But despite the master's infernal appearance, he smelled of human flesh, sweat, and blood, and one could hear the heart thumping away in his breast. Such telltale signs of life were one of the reasons that the coven had initially refused to serve him, obliging him to break them to his will. Afterwards, of course, they'd come to adore him for his power and his cruelties, though it was a tainted worship laced with envy and resentment. Such was the perverse devotion with which members of their kind generally regarded their lords, a feeling not entirely unlike the masochistic emotional bondage they sometimes imposed on their prey.

Despite the keenness of their senses, none of the sorcerer's minions ever saw him come or go. Helen wondered just how

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long he'd been standing in the front of the church, and if, perchance, he'd overheard Carla and herself discussing him with less than utter reverence. His black eyes gazed directly at her, and he gave her a sardonic smile. Despite herself, she trembled.

But he didn't command her forward for punishment. Instead, he scrutinized the members of the coven for another moment, then intoned, "Tell me of the world."

"The world is broken," Helen said in chorus with her fellows. The master had taught them this simple litany on the very night they'd surrendered to him.

"Why is it broken?" asked the sorcerer.

"The gods are in prison."

"Who will free them?"

"We will."

"Who will free them?"

"We will!"

"*Who* will free them?"

"*We will!*"

"Yes," the red-clad sorcerer said, his heavy golden wristband gleaming as he gestured, "we will indeed, and then the Dark Ones will reshape the Earth into the place that it was always meant to be. A world scoured clean of puling, craven morality. A realm where only strength and cunning matter. A paradise where the predators reign supreme, free to slake every craving and indulge every whim. A planet where you and I will be as demigods. We will stand above all others in the Elder Gods' favor, for the sake of their liberation. A liberation we are now ready to effect. It begins tonight, and will come to pass in a matter of days."

Helen gaped up at him in astonishment. The rest of the coven seemed just as surprised.

The horned man sneered at their reaction. "Why are you so amazed? I told you this night would come, and come soon. Did you think me akin to some pathetic mortal evangelist,

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prattling about apocalypses and days of judgment that never arrive? Rest assured, I am neither deluded nor a charlatan, and all that I tell you is true. The Dark Ones are real. I've walked with them in the dimension of their exile. It was magic that trapped them there, cast by a being not fundamentally different than myself. What one sorcerer weaves, another can unravel, provided he grasps the trick of it—and after seven hundred years of study, I finally do.” He stared down at his minions. “Do you believe me?”

“Yes,” Helen breathed. After all the ghastly miracles she'd seen him work, she did believe that he could change the face of the world. The prospect was exhilarating and terrifying in equal measure.

“It is well that you believe,” the master said. “Your faith will be rewarded, just as apostasy would bring a swift and dire punishment. Now, two of you have a special role to play in the struggle to come. Helen and Carla, come to me.”

Helen jumped in surprise. Hitherto, the horned man had never so much as hinted that he regarded her as anything more than just another servant. Carla looked just as startled. But neither dared question the magician's command. They rose from their pew and headed down the aisle.

Though they strode briskly, scarcely daring to do otherwise, the short walk seemed to take a long time, like an action in a dream. In passing, Helen noticed the faces of her siblings. Some looked relieved that the master hadn't called for them; others, jealous at being passed over; and one or two, those who had lost their mortality most recently, betrayed a hint of pity. Mostly, however, she was conscious of the sorcerer's fierce gaze.

Helen and Carla would have stopped beneath the altar, but the master motioned for them to ascend the steps to the dais and stand beside him. “Behold the anointed ones,” he said to the rest of the coven, “the chosen instruments of the gods.”

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He looked into the women's faces. "Are you afraid, my daughters?"

"No," Carla said. Helen was certain she was lying.

"Yes," Helen said, "but I trust you, Master—" that was *almost* true "—and I want to live in the world you promised. I want to be a demigod. I want more power. Power is the only thing that's ever done me any good."

The sorcerer smiled. "Well said, both of you. It pleases me that your resolve is strong, for your paths will not be easy. You will suffer, see your very natures altered, and very likely perish." A cold thrill of fear sang along Helen's nerves. "But you have experienced all these things before, only to rise in glory, and I swear by the Dark Ones that you will rise again. The gods will resurrect you in the world to come. A future that the slaves who serve our pleasure will curse as Hell on Earth, but which will be an Eden for creatures such as ourselves. Now kneel."

The women obeyed. The hardwood floor, filthy with dirt, mouse droppings, and spatters of dried blood, felt cold and hard beneath Helen's knees. The stench of the crucified corpse filled her nose and made her feel lightheaded.

The master drew his sword, the metal whispering as it emerged from the scabbard. There were runes graven just below the guard, and the razor-sharp blade shone with a sickly phosphorescence. "The Elder Gods themselves forged this weapon," the horned man said. "Worship it." He extended it to Helen, and, after a moment's hesitation, she pressed her lips against the steel.

The sword was icy cold, and its touch sent a shock of nausea and revulsion through Helen's body. Nevertheless, she managed not to recoil. The sorcerer then presented the weapon to Carla, who did just as good a job of masking her own repugnance.

The master gave a slight nod, as if his acolytes had just

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passed a test. "Rise," he said, and when they'd obeyed: "Helen, you will be first. Lie on the altar."

Once again feeling lost in a dream, Helen reclined on the bloodstained basalt. "Fix this moment in your memory," the master told her. "This is the beginning of our triumph." He lowered his voice, like a lover confiding a secret. "And just to make it all the sweeter, it is my greatest enemies who will furnish the key."

Helen experienced another jolt of fear, one that had nothing to do with the prospect of her own mysterious transformation or the advent of a new world she couldn't truly comprehend. "Do you mean—?"

The sorcerer shook his head. "No, little she-wolf, not him. Not the being whom you feel that you betrayed. I was referring to a band of self-styled heroes. Mortal fools, but formidable all the same. But this time, I'm ready for them. This time, they're going to play *my* game." He swung the sword above his head. "Brace yourself."

The blade plunged down, the point driving completely through her torso and pinning her to the stone. She screamed in agony.

Ramparts of cumulonimbus cloud covered the night sky, masking any hint of dawn. Rain pounded steadily on the broad expanse of river far below, threatening to overwhelm the complex system of levees and spillways designed to protect the city beside it from harm. On the ground, engineers and crews of emergency workers were no doubt laboring desperately to buttress these defenses, but the X-Man called Storm knew that it would be only a matter of time until the Mississippi broke its bonds to flood Natchez and all points south.

Unless, of course, she could prevent it.

A willowy African-American woman with luminous blue eyes and a magnificent mane of long white hair, Ororo Munroe—who used the appropriate sobriquet of Storm—floated between

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the river and the clouds, the folds of her silver-gray cape billowing in the wind that bore her up. Frowning, she studied the turbulent air overhead with a sense that was not exactly sight. It was simply an aspect of her own gift, the power to command the forces of wind, precipitation, and lightning. She was born with this talent; it set her, and her fellow X-Men, apart from the baseline of *Homo sapiens*. Ororo was a mutant.

Today, however, her gift seemed to be failing her. She wasn't having much success against this particular storm. And now she sensed an updraft spinning counterclockwise about half a mile away, twisting itself around the zone of low pressure at its core.

The mutant wished she could simply ignore the isolated event and keep working on breaking up the entire system. But if she did, the whirling updraft was likely to turn into a tornado, a phenomenon just as potentially deadly as the impending flood. So she flew closer to the vortex, then willed it to dissolve. Gradually the spiral began to disperse.

Rogue flew to her side. Storm's teammate was an athletic-looking young woman clad in a green-and-yellow formfitting uniform and a brown leather jacket. Her face was as lovely as Storm's but in an entirely different style. The saucy curve of her lips, the pugnacious set of her jaw, and the glint in her emerald eyes suggested a rebellious, impulsive, and hot-tempered personality, while the windrider's features bespoke a nature that was ordinarily gentle and serene. The two friends were a study in contrasts, and rarely more so than now.

Rogue was too nearly invulnerable to feel much discomfort from the lashing of the wind and rain. But she didn't have Storm's weather-working powers to keep her warm and dry. Her brown, white-streaked hair was thoroughly soaked and tangled, inviting, her beauty notwithstanding, the customary comparison to a drowned rat.

"How's it goin', 'Roro?" she asked in her sultry Southern accent.

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"Not well," the other mutant replied, still concentrating on dispersing the last of the vortex. "I've tried blowing the clouds out to sea and making air rise from the land—rain can't fall if you have a strong enough updraft. Warming the clouds so they could retain more moisture. Disrupting the static charges inside them to retard the formation of condensation nuclei." It still felt a bit odd to explain feats in the language of science that she'd always understood and performed wordlessly, instinctively, but it was the only way to communicate them. "So far, none of it has helped. I admit, I've had difficulty affecting major weather systems before, just because the forces involved are so huge. But this is different. It's like some power is actively opposing me, countering whatever I attempt."

"Do you think you'll be able to prevent a flood?" asked Rogue, a hint of worry in her voice. She'd grown up in Mississippi. That was very likely why she'd insisted that she be the one to accompany Storm on the mission, not that anyone had argued. The fact that she too could fly made her a logical choice.

"I don't know," said Ororo. She saw the embryonic tornado dissipate, and knew a pang of satisfaction. That was one small battle won, anyway. "With the Goddess's help, I'll do my best."

"I know you will," Rogue said. She smiled crookedly. "Don't you wish we were on vacation right now? I still think Bobby rigged it when we cut the cards to see who had to stick around."

Mere days before, a harrowing odyssey through time in the company of their sometime ally Spider-Man had left the X-Men thoroughly exhausted. Accordingly, Professor Charles Xavier, the founder and leader of the mutant super hero team as well as the world's more powerful telepath, had decided that the group would stand down so that the team could take some sorely needed R&R.

But the X-Men were the world's first line of defense against

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those representatives of *homo sapiens superior* who chose to use their talents for sinister purposes, as well as the primary protectors of any peaceful mutants endangered by the xenophobia of ordinary humanity. Their responsibilities were too important for them ever to stand down completely, and thus a skeleton crew comprised of Ororo, Rogue, and Scott Summers and Jean Grey—the senior X-Men codenamed Cyclops and Phoenix—had been chosen to stay in residence at their headquarters in Salem Center, New York. Everyone else was either about to depart or had gone already.

The four hangers-on had hoped that their duties would be limited to monitoring the world situation, maintaining equipment, and updating files, but it wasn't to be. Not for Storm, anyway, not once she'd sensed a *wrongness* in the weather hundreds of miles to the southwest. The disturbance grated on her like a persistent toothache, or the roar of a jackhammer clattering on and on. She'd yearned to make the nagging sensation stop.

Using Professor X's state-of-the-art communications system to access the National Weather Service, she'd discovered that meteorologists the world over were nearly as dismayed as she was, albeit on a less visceral level. Despite the preexisting pattern of warm and cold fronts which should have precluded such a buildup, cumulus clouds from across the continent were converging on Natchez, as if a colossal, invisible hand were reaching out and gathering them in to create a torrential downpour.

Ororo had immediately resolved to go to the site of the storm, to determine the cause if possible and in any case to prevent a flood which might otherwise claim hundreds or even thousands of lives. And as she'd pretty much expected, her comrades had insisted that at least one of them tag along. Not that any of the other X-Men could help her influence the weather, but there was at least a theoretical possibility that some supercriminal or outlaw scientist was responsible for the

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impending calamity, and they wanted her to have backup in case any such malefactor appeared.

I wish somebody would come out and fight, Storm thought sourly. Capturing a flesh-and-blood enemy and shutting down his or her rain-making gadget would almost certainly be easier than her current struggle. She drew more electricity forth from a towering jumble of clouds. The discharge blazed across the sky.

Helen rose into the air. It felt odd to fly simply by willing it, rather than by beating leathery wings. But the master hadn't wanted the mutants to divine prematurely what manner of creature she truly was, and so he'd bestowed upon her the power to fly in human form.

But that change was trivial compared to the transformation yet to come. She wondered if the entity who was about to spring into existence would still be, in any true sense, herself, or if she was about to commit a particularly bizarre form of suicide. The latter possibility made her shiver as the pounding rain and the howling wind could not, but she told herself to trust in the sorcerer's promises.

After ascending for half a minute, she spotted two women floating in the air. The one in the cape and thigh-high boots gestured, and lighting burned across the sky.

So these were the X-Men. Super heroes or super terrorists, depending on whom one believed. Like everyone else, Helen had heard of such people, but never expected to see one. They hadn't seemed to have anything to do with her world of blood-thirst and endless night.

Now that she'd found them, she suddenly felt a hunter's urge to pounce. But at the moment, they were drifting within a few feet of one another, and if they were as powerful as the master claimed, it would be prudent to wait at least a little while in the hope that they'd move farther apart. The sorcerer had also told her that Storm and Rogue's eyes were no keener

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than those of ordinary humans, and so, confident that the two mortals were unlikely to notice her lurking in the darkness, she hovered and watched.

Rogue had never considered herself a hero. A decent soldier maybe, what her teammate Wolverine might call a warrior, somebody who was belatedly trying to do some good in the world. But she'd caused too much harm and fought on the wrong side too many times in her chaotic life to delude herself into thinking she was anything more.

Storm, however, was all hero, as valiant and self-sacrificing a spirit as Rogue had ever known. With so many lives and homes in jeopardy, it was easy to imagine her hammering stubbornly away at the storm until she'd exhausted her mutant powers completely. At which point she'd no longer be able to fly.

Which meant that as far as Rogue was concerned, her primary responsibility here was to preserve her friend from a fatal fall. She studied the black woman's face and movements, looking for signs of fatigue.

What she saw was somewhat reassuring. Though Ororo clearly *was* tiring, Rogue had seen her looking considerably worse, yet still well able to command the wind. The brunette decided she could leave her comrade to her own devices while she flew another patrol, just in case some superhuman megalomaniac actually was planning to pop up out of nowhere and take credit for the storm.

"I'm going to look around again," she said. Intent on her labors, Ororo merely nodded. Spiraling outward and downward, Rogue flew away from her teammate.

For the moment, the lights of Natchez were still shining down below. Rogue imagined floodwater raging across the city, putting out the lamps, smashing its way into homes, businesses, and the antebellum mansions in the heart of town, and grimaced. It was surprising how protective she felt of this

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country of bayous and pine forests, of soybean and cotton fields, considering how little she recalled of her time here. But maybe that was why. Her genuine memories were so spotty and tangled with those she'd stolen from others that it made her treasure her few surviving recollections of her childhood, of a happy, innocent time before she became a menace to everyone around her, all the more.

She glimpsed motion from the corner of her eye. Something was hurtling at her.

Rogue reflexively swooped lower to dodge. A rather small figure shot past, its outstretched hands snatching at the space her head had occupied a split second before.

You don't know how lucky you are that you didn't get a hold of me, Rogue thought. Cautious but unafraid—after all the tight scrapes she'd survived over the years, there was very little that scared her anymore—she flew toward her would-be assailant, who now hovered motionless as if to invite her approach.

Her attacker appeared to be a homely, scrawny, prim-looking woman in her late thirties, clad in a now-sodden, lacy blouse and navy suit. Sensible flat-heeled black shoes completed her ensemble. Overall, she reminded Rogue of a spinster librarian or teacher in an old movie. During her career as an adventurer, the X-Man had discovered that the unlikeliest looking people could sometimes possess extraordinary power, but even so, the newcomer, her ability to fly notwithstanding, didn't look like much of a threat. She was certainly a far cry from standard-issue super-villains with their bulging muscles, garish costumes, gigantic guns, and miscellaneous hunks of body armor.

“Are you the lady who ordered up all this rain?” the mutant asked. “If you are, you took your time getting here. My friend and I had just about given up on you.”

The other woman grinned a feral grin, exposing fangs, and abruptly her appearance didn't seem harmless or humorous at

all. "No," she said. "The master conjured the storm. I'm just the lady who's come to kill you." Her eyes gleaming red, she rocketed forward.

All right, darlin', thought Rogue, closing her fists, *let's party. Take your best shot, I'll knock you around a little, and then 'Roro and I'll sweat some answers out of you.* She calmly held her position until the crimson-eyed woman had nearly closed the distance between them, then shifted to the side and threw a punch, using only a fraction of her strength. She didn't dare hit an opponent of unknown capacities as hard as she could for fear of killing her. If her attacker shrugged off this blow, then she'd slug her harder next time.

Midway to the target, her yellow glove burst into flame and burned away to nothing in an instant, as if the thin woman's body was surrounded by a corona of invisible fire. Rogue felt no discomfort—her skin was far too tough for that, even if the blaze hadn't flared up and died so quickly—but she experienced a jolt of horror nonetheless.

Because her true mutant gift was neither Herculean strength, invulnerability, nor flight. It was the power to leech away another person's memories and capabilities whenever they touched skin to skin, even if she didn't want to. It forever denied her the joys of physical intimacy. The assimilation of someone else's thoughts and emotions, even when it only happened at an unconscious level, inevitably undermined her sanity and sense of self. Even worse, sometimes the transfer was permanent, leaving her victims damaged. When she was just a teenager and her power first manifested itself, her kiss had plunged her beloved friend Cody into a coma which lasted until the day he died. She could soar through the air, lift a fifty-ton weight, and shrug off bullets because she'd stolen those abilities from a woman named Carol Danvers, leaving her powerless and emotionally barren.

Thus she avoided using her talent except in the most dire emergencies, and now she did her best to stop her blow. But

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it was too late. Her bare knuckles still grazed the red-eyed woman's jaw.

Even that fleeting contact was sufficient to initiate the transfer. Indeed, the other woman's essence raged into her mind like floodwater bursting through a breach in a dike, as if she wasn't stealing it at all. As if her victim was *forcing* her thoughts and powers on her. Momentarily overwhelmed, it was all Rogue could do to keep herself aloft.

Meanwhile, stunned into unconsciousness, the crimson-eyed woman—a vampire, Rogue now knew, whose name was Helen Purvis—fell. *That helpless, tumbling, thing is me*, the X-Man thought in mingled horror and fascination. *Or at least it was. And it'll shrivel and die as soon as the sun comes up.*

She realized that she didn't want to think about that. Wrenching her eyes away before Helen struck the surface of the water, she began to take stock of herself, and what she found sent a thrill of elation singing through her. She was many times stronger than Helen had ever been, and her power to wrest away the thoughts and capacities of any victim made the other woman's simple blood-drinking seem a paltry thing indeed. She'd never lusted to use her gift before—indeed, she would have paid any price to be rid of it—but suddenly such squeamishness was inconceivable. Now she hungered to devour someone's else vitality.

Fortunately, sustenance was near at hand, in the form of prey whose superhuman energies would invigorate her as no ordinary victim's could. Smiling in anticipation, her fangs lengthening even though she didn't need them anymore, she pulled off her remaining glove and let it drop. Then she soared upward toward Storm, who was still concentrating so fiercely on undoing the master's handiwork that she evidently hadn't even noticed the confrontation unfolding under her feet.

Lightning flared, illuminating Ororo's lovely, frowning features. Beholding them, Rogue halted her ascent in confusion and dismay.

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Storm was her friend. She didn't want to hurt her. She didn't want to use her power on anyone. Or rather, she did—the urge seethed inside her—but only because something was wrong with her.

Though her mind was in disarray, she dimly comprehended what was happening to her, because she'd experienced something similar before. Helen's essence was too strong. It was contaminating her own thoughts and threatened to possess her completely. If it succeeded, she would essentially be Helen, a merciless predator who hungered for the vital energy of others.

Ororo glanced down, and, seeing her teammate hanging just a few feet beneath her, floated lower, her silver tresses streaming in the wind. At her approach, Rogue's hunger welled up inside her. She opened her mouth to warn her friend away, but simultaneously levitated to meet her.

"Your eyes!" Storm exclaimed in surprise, and then Rogue grabbed her right forearm just above the dark, steel alloy bracelet.

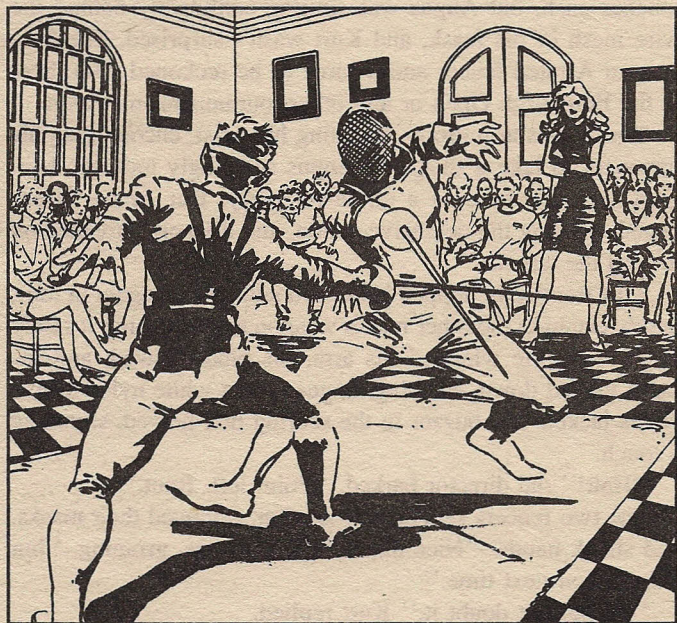
Ororo convulsed and went limp, while Rogue discovered that her power was working a bit differently than it ever had before. The transfer of energies seemed slower, yet even more powerful, powerful enough to wrest away a victim's very life. The influx of energy felt so good that it set her to laughing madly.

But despite her ecstasy, a part of her fragmented self still loved Storm and loathed what she was doing to her, and after a moment that seemed to last forever, that portion clawed its way to a fragile ascendancy. She shoved her friend violently away, then turned and fled before Helen's hunger could master her anew.

In her addled state, Rogue flew for several minutes before realizing that she'd just left her depleted, unconscious teammate to plummet to her death.



CHAPTER 2



Angus Graham advanced down the copper fencing strip with short, crisp steps, his knees deeply flexed, his arm straight, and the point of his electric épée threatening Kurt Wagner's sword hand. The score was all tied up at four touches each, but Angus was smiling confidently behind the wire mesh of his mask, and Kurt wasn't surprised. The Scot was an A-rated fencer and a force to be reckoned with, here at the Edinburgh Open or any other tournament in Britain.

Kurt let his arm droop, exposing his wrist, encouraging his opponent to take a shot, and Angus seemingly took the bait. Kurt spun his épée in a circle-six parry. But Angus disengaged, evading the defensive action, and his point streaked on toward the target.

Kurt frantically hopped backward and parried again in four, barely catching the other man's weapon and sweeping it safely to the side. He whipped his arm, his blade bowed, and his point flicked down, catching Angus on the white nylon sleeve of his jacket. The buzzer in the scoring box brayed, signaling a touch.

"Halt!" the director barked. "Point left. Bout."

The two fencers saluted one another, removed their masks, and shook hands. "Nice match," said Angus, grinning, "but I'll get you next time."

"I wouldn't doubt it," Kurt replied.

He unplugged his body cord from the cable that had connected him to the reel at his end of the strip, handed the line to the next fencer, wished him luck, and vacated the playing area. When he looked around the gymnasium, where a dozen bouts were being fought at once while other fencers looked

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on to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the competition, he felt a surge of pure happiness.

Lord, but he loved to fence! He'd fallen in love with the idea of swordplay when he was just a boy, upon viewing swashbuckling movies like *Captain Blood* and *The Mark of Zorro*, and the reality had more than lived up to his expectations. He was grateful for Charles Xavier's holographic image inducer, which allowed the mutant known as Nightcrawler—a blue-furred, yellow-eyed, three-fingered elf of a man with a prehensile tail—to assume the guise of Douglas Flynn, a devilishly handsome but otherwise seemingly ordinary human. Kurt preferred not to use the inducer for the most part, feeling it hypocritical to fight for acceptance of mutants among humanity while simultaneously hiding his true face. But without it, he could never have been accepted into events like this as just another amateur athlete.

A slender blonde of medium height sauntered up to him. She was Amanda Sefton, sorceress, his sometime comrade in the team of adventurers called Excalibur, and, despite some rocky times, the abiding love of his life. "Well," she murmured in a voice too low for anyone else to overhear, her blue eyes shining mischievously, "doesn't the mighty super hero look pleased with himself for beating up on a poor unsuspecting weekend warrior?"

Nightcrawler arched an eyebrow. "If I'm not mistaken, *liebchen*, Angus was Scottish national champion three years back. That makes him a relatively formidable 'weekend warrior.' And you know, it's not as if I have inhuman speed like Quicksilver, or incredible strength like Hank. I'm no faster or stronger than a normal human."

"Provided that the human used to be a trapeze artist, and has kept himself in perfect shape ever since."

Kurt shrugged. "The point is, that while I can teleport and cling to a sheer wall, my gifts are such that I can choose not to use them, and compete with other fencers fairly."

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"I know that," the sorceress said, relenting. "I was only teasing. Sometimes you get so puffed up when you're doing well at these things that it's hard to resist. It's—" She winced.

"Is something wrong?" asked Kurt.

"No," she said, massaging her temple with her fingertips. "I mean, it just feels like the start of a headache. If I can't rub or meditate it away, I've got some aspirin in my bag. I was starting to say, it's noon-ish." Her mouth tightened, as if at another twinge of pain. "Shall I run out and buy us some lunch? There's a café right around the corner. I can be back in plenty of time to cheer you on through the direct eliminations."

The mutant caressed her cheek with his free hand. "You," he said, "are a ministering angel. I probably should eat something, especially since I still have the sabre competition after this. But before you go anywhere, why don't you sit down and relax for—"

Amanda's eyes rolled back in her head, and her knees buckled. Dropping his mask and épée to the floor, Kurt grabbed her to keep her from falling.

The young sorceress thrashed as if she were having a seizure, slumped, and then, to Kurt's astonishment, calmly straightened up, shrugged off his hands, and gave him a contemptuous sneer that was utterly unlike any expression he'd ever seen on her face before.

"Nightcrawler," she said. Like Kurt, she'd grown up among the Rom in Bavaria but spoke perfect English, generally without so much as a trace of an accent. Now, however, he heard one tingeing her voice. "Your disguise nonplussed me for a moment. But of course, you would have to hide those freakish looks of yours to mingle with the rabble. Otherwise they'd burn you at the stake."

"What are you talking about?" Kurt asked, so bewildered and upset that he almost forgot to speak softly. "I've had the

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image inducer turned on all day, ever since we left the island. Don't you remember?"

Amanda sighed. "You're slow, X-Man. You've been keeping company with this sad excuse for a witch ever since I've known you, and you've walked with mages of genuine power. Yet, in spite of all your experience with the supernatural, you still fail to recognize a case of simple possession when it's looking you directly in the face."

In point of fact, Kurt had seen other people invaded and controlled by disembodied minds. Was that what had happened to Amanda? The possibility filled him with horror and rage. "Get out of her," he said.

"Of course, you are the devout Christian of your ragtag band," Amanda—or the being inside Amanda—continued, ignoring his demand, "and Christians are generally stupid. They have to be, don't you think, to maintain their puerile faith in the face of all the pain and injustice in the world." She smiled a malevolent smile. "Or have you maintained it? By now, you've seen enough horror to fill a hundred ordinary mortal lifetimes, from the genocidal madness of the ignorant masses to the boundless savagery of the N'Garai. Did your childish, blinkered beliefs weather each and every atrocity? Or have you, in your heart of hearts, begun to doubt?"

"Get out of her," Kurt repeated, his voice a slow, dangerous whisper.

Amanda grinned. "What will you do if I refuse? Strike me? If you want your lover's tender young body damaged, I'd be happy to attend to it for you." With one fluid motion, she stooped and retrieved the fallen épée. "I could, for example, compel her to impale herself on this. And I will, unless you compose yourself and converse with me like the gentleman whom, judging from your sport of choice, you evidently imagine yourself to be."

Nightcrawler drew a deep breath, to steady himself. "All right, we'll talk. Who are you?"

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"If you haven't already surmised, I prefer to withhold my identity for the moment."

Actually, Kurt suspected that he did know, though he fervently hoped he was mistaken. "Then tell me what you want."

"Simply to parley face to face, both of us in our own bodies, about a matter of mutual concern. Meet me at nine tonight, on this Muir Island of yours, in front of your citadel. Bring your trollop here, along with dull, earnest Piotr, and impudent, meddling Kitty."

Kurt felt marginally reassured, since at least the spirit evidently intended to terminate its possession of Amanda. "What about the rest of Excalibur?"

"I'm told you command the team, so send them away. I don't wish to contend with a veritable mob of super heroes." Her tone suffused the appellation with mockery. "I've learned the hard way just how excitable and unreasonable you upstarts can be. I also prefer to deal with people who are known quantities, and who have firsthand experience of the business before us."

"Which is?"

"Patience, X-Man. Had I wished to enlighten you now, I would already have done so. I'll make everything clear tonight."

"What if I say that's not good enough? That if you won't give me some answers now, my friends and I will have no part of you."

Amanda swayed drunkenly. "Possession under these circumstances is rather difficult," she observed. "I wouldn't have resorted to it to contact you if time were not of the essence. But rest assured that if need be, I can retain control for awhile longer, and I guarantee that if you won't grant my really quite innocuous requests, then you won't get dear Amanda back in anything approaching mint condition."

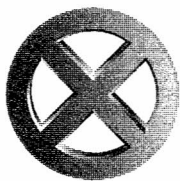
"All right," Kurt growled. He hated letting any enemy

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dictate to him, and his every instinct warned him that the possessing spirit was precisely that. But for the time being, he had little choice but to acquiesce. "Set Amanda free right now, come to our base tonight, and we'll talk. But I warn you, one false move and we'll take you down."

"But of course," the sorceress said. "That is to say, you'll try. One more thing. Have your airplane ready for flight." Without warning, she collapsed.

Caught by surprise, this time Kurt wasn't quick enough to grab her, and she thumped down heavily onto the floor. Hastily he stooped over her, dropping into the crouch which was as natural to him as standing erect. She gazed blankly up at him for a moment, and then her face twisted into a mask of anguish. Sobbing hysterically, she flung herself into his arms.



CHAPTER 3



When the woman woke, she was hanging in a gray-black void. Everything was silent and all of it—the darkness, the emptiness, and the quiet—seemed to echo the hollowness in her head. At first she had no thoughts at all, not even the suspicion that such a vacancy was wrong.

Then a surge of raw, instinctive terror jolted her, shrieking that she was in danger, demanding that she focus. Peering wildly about, she perceived the broad expanse of the river beneath her and, after a fashion, her intellect lurched to life. She still didn't know precisely where she was, how she'd come to be there, or even who she was, but she recognized that she wasn't floating after all. She was plummeting through a benighted, rain-swept sky toward a lethal collision with the surface of the water far below.

She wanted to scream, to beg the remorseless and impersonal powers of Nature for a mercy they would never grant, to shriek out her rage at the doom that was overtaking her. Yet some instinct implored her not to panic, insisting in defiance of all reason that she possessed the ability to save herself if she could only draw it forth.

When she groped for that capacity, she actually did sense it inside her, but the discovery failed to blunt the fear still clawing at her mind. The talent, whatever it was, had shriveled like a hand withered by palsy.

The Earth reached up for her. She was now low enough to make out pieces of flotsam racing along in the river.

She told herself not to worry about her mysterious power having all but crumbled away, to concentrate instead on recalling or discovering what it did.

Unfortunately, strain as she might, she couldn't remember

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anything about it. Nor could she analyze its properties merely by concentrating on the way it felt, lying dormant and crippled in her mind and body.

But perhaps analysis was the wrong approach. The power wasn't a machine, some instrumentality separate from herself. It was a part of her, just like her limbs, and a person didn't have to exercise conscious, methodical control over her legs to make them walk. She simply had to decide to move, and her nerves and muscles did the rest.

The falling woman did her best to stop thinking. Instead she tried to trust the power, to feel and accept it as an innate part of herself, and then to exert it as instinctively as she might reach out and pluck an apple from a tree.

For a second or two, nothing happened. Then, debilitated though it was, her gift stirred. She perceived the atmosphere around her almost as if it were solid and she were touching every molecule of it at once. She willed the air directly beneath her to blast upward in a steady stream forceful enough to arrest her descent.

Overtaxed, her power strained while her muscles ached and clenched in sympathy with the struggle. An updraft gusted too feebly to do her any good, faltered, then blew again, this time more powerfully. Ever so gradually, her fall slowed, until at last she was floating about fifty feet above the river, the folds of her black cape swelling with the wind that held her up.

Then, abruptly, her talent died like a candle burning out. She fell again.

She could tell that for the moment at least, the power was gone beyond recall. Acting on instinct once more, she arched her back and straightened her limbs, arranging her body for a dive.

She entered the water cleanly, perpendicular to its surface, and plunged deep into its lightless depths. Strangely, the cold, smothering blackness brought the worst surge of terror yet, as if she'd been buried alive. The fear now was even more in-

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tense than at the instant when she'd first realized she was falling.

Frantically she kicked and stroked upward. At last, she broke the surface, and the hysterical dread abated.

Treading water, she took stock of her situation. She was a long way from shore and already weary, but even so, she thought she had a chance to make it to safety. That was because she now remembered that she loved to swim and was good at it. In fact, though the rest of the past was still a blank, she clearly recalled a moment from her childhood: splashing about naked and alone in a lake under a tropical sun, while several oryx, long since grown accustomed to her presence, ambled down to the water to drink.

Her cape would hinder her movements, and her alloy bracelets, light though they were considering their bulk, would weigh her down, so she left them in the river. She considered pulling off her high, skintight boots as well, but they were made of something so light that she doubted they'd be a problem. Like a wetsuit, they might even help to stave off hypothermia.

She started swimming, essentially moving right along with the swollen, muddy river, but trying to maintain a slight diagonal that would, theoretically, carry her to shore. If she attempted to reach her destination any more directly, it would mean fighting the current, and its power, vastly strengthened by the runoff from the storm, would very likely overwhelm her.

The rain made a sizzling sound as it pounded the surface of the river. Waterlogged strands of her long white hair plastered themselves to her face. *I should have kept the mohawk*, she thought wryly, then realized she'd regained another memory.

Suddenly some sixth sense warned her she was in danger. Glancing back, she saw the black bulk of a barge, laden with a pyramid of logs and broken loose from its moorings, come

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scudding out of the darkness, bearing down on her as if some murderous pilot were steering it.

She tried to flounder out of its path, then saw that she wasn't going to make it. Desperately she dove beneath the surface, allowing the barge to pass above her. In her still-muddled condition, it was only after she came up again that it occurred to her that she might conceivably have grabbed hold of the vessel and hauled herself aboard, and by that time it was already lost in the gloom.

Gradually a chill crept into her flesh, while her muscles grew numb with fatigue. She started to fear that she wouldn't reach land after all. At the end, she was laboring so desperately simply to keep her head above water that she virtually lost her bearings. She was surprised when the current swept her through an open gate in a concrete levee and down a diversionary canal.

A steel ladder, bolted to the wall on her left, appeared in the gloom ahead. She fought to steer herself toward it with all her failing strength, and, her arm outstretched, just managed to grab it before the water could sweep her by.

She pulled herself onto the ladder and clung with all her might, like a frightened child clinging to her mother. She wasn't sure she could climb it, but she knew she had to try. If she simply stayed where she was, submerged to the shoulders in the rushing water, she would only grow colder and weaker until the current finally tore her from her perch.

So she dragged herself upward, one painful, faltering step at a time, while below her, the spillway hissed as if angry at being cheated of its plaything. Finally she hauled herself over the top of the ladder and onto a sheet of tarmac, where she sprawled, gasping and shivering, on her belly.

Eventually, when her breathing eased a little, she heard voices to her left. Wiping wet hair from her eyes, she turned her head in that direction. Several yards away, four men in day-glow orange slickers and yellow hardhats were consulting

a set of maps and documents sealed in plastic to protect them from the downpour.

The white-haired woman tried to call to them for help, but her first feeble cry was too faint for them to hear. She sucked in a breath to try again, and then another flash of memory made her hesitate.

She had enemies—powerful, cunning, merciless foes who would love to see her perish. She could even picture a few of them, albeit not clearly: a white-haired man who generally wore a helmet, a creature who resembled a cross between a human being and a winged dinosaur, a pale man with metallic-looking skin. One of them might well have hurled her down from the sky. Until she remembered who she was and who they were, it would be reckless to trust anyone, particularly in her weakened condition. For the time being, she'd have to fend for herself.

She silently drew herself to her feet. The stealthy action felt familiar and accomplished, and she realized that whoever she was, she must have once trained hard to master the art of sneaking about undetected. Was she a hunter? Or a spy? Frustrated by her inability to recall, she tiptoed away from the oblivious men.

Lashed by the wind and rain, Rogue crouched beside a small satellite dish TV antenna mounted on the pitched, shingled roof of a two-story wooden house. She couldn't remember how or why she'd come to land in that particular place. As near as she could determine, she was blacking out occasionally, a byproduct of her own personality battling for dominance with Helen Purvis's inside her.

At least she hadn't attacked anyone during the blackout, or at any rate she didn't think so. If she had, surely she wouldn't be so wracked with hunger now.

Below her, a door banged, voices sounded, and the front porch creaked. A heavysset man and a lanky teenage boy lum-

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bered into view carrying a large television, wrapped in plastic and duct tape to protect it from the rain. They shoved it into the back of a battered blue Chevy pickup, then headed back inside, no doubt for more possessions too precious to abandon to a flood.

Despite the downpour, with her newly heightened senses, Rogue could smell the scent of the humans' warm flesh marbled with its intricate network of arteries and veins, just as she could hear the thumping of their hearts. Even though it was no longer blood she craved, her awareness of the vital fluid pulsing through the mortals' bodies still enflamed her hunger another notch. She clutched at the roof as if to anchor herself in place. Her fingertips shredded shingles and bit into the planks beneath.

Father and son disappeared back inside their home. Rogue resolved to flee before they returned. But as she rose into the air, a small woman struggled through the door, a pair of overstuffed, green plastic garbage bags in her arms. She'd cut holes in another such sack, then pulled it over her head to serve as a makeshift poncho.

Suddenly the hunger was in control. Indeed, Rogue only vaguely recalled that she'd ever had any qualms about indulging it. Leering, she landed in a crouch between the human and the truck.

The woman was in her thirties, with pink cheeks, a wide, full-lipped mouth, and a snub nose. Despite her improvised hood, raindrops had already spotted her wire-rim glasses. Startled, she gasped and lurched backward, still reflexively clutching her bundles.

It was always amusing to see terror in the face of the prey. Despite her hunger, Rogue decided to draw the moment out a little. Gliding forward, she tore open the garbage bags, partly to get their bulky contents out of her way, but mostly just for the fun of undoing the human's work. Framed photos, diplomas, certificates, scrapbooks, a wedding album, and a huge

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old family Bible all spilled out into the mud and standing water. The front cover of the Bible split away from the spine.

The mutant reached for her victim's face, and then the mortal shrieked. Perhaps it was her cry that jolted Rogue back to some semblance of sanity. The X-Man wrenched her hands back, whirled, and staggered away, though denying her compulsion like this, at the last possible moment, brought a pang of frustration as excruciating as torture. "Get back inside!" she croaked.

The porch groaned, and the door banged. That at least put the mortal woman out of sight. But Rogue still couldn't help thinking just how easy it would be to follow her inside. With her strength, she could smash down the door with a flick of her hand, then stalk through the house draining everyone, first the mother, then the father, then however many children there were.

No! She forced herself to fly up and away, leaving the helpless family far behind. She wondered if she should travel on to some remote location, perhaps the middle of the Gulf of Mexico, to distance herself from other people. But it took energy to defy gravity, and she was afraid that the more she expended, the more ungovernable the hunger would grow. Eventually, after some wandering, she settled atop a red brick winery, with muscadine grape vines growing on trellises on the hillside behind it. As far as she could tell, no one was currently on the premises, and the establishment was set well back from the street and away from other buildings, so it promised at least a measure of isolation.

The hunger welled up inside her, and she nearly sobbed. *Lord, why is this happening?* Stolen memories had overwhelmed her before, but the effect invariably faded over time. In contrast, the essence of Helen Purvis was growing steadily stronger.

Sometimes she perceived Helen as a distinct and separate entity inside her head, wrestling her for control, and that was

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frightening and dangerous enough. But often the alien personality simply permeated her thoughts and feelings like silt suspended in water, and that was infinitely worse, because it was far more difficult to resist. At certain moments, it made it impossible to discern where she ended and the vampire began.

Vampire. She'd never met such a monster before—supernatural threats were by no means the X-Men's specialty—but some of her teammates had, and Helen clearly matched the description. It was nauseating to think that Rogue had assimilated the persona of something not merely malevolent or even inhuman but *dead*. Given the predator's nocturnal nature, the mutant had prayed that Helen and her murderous desires might fall asleep when dawn broke, but no such luck. The sun had surely risen by now, though, due to the rain clouds covering the sky, the world was nearly as gloomy as before. Yet the vampire's spirit was as active as ever.

Rogue was all but certain that she'd been set up to absorb Helen's essence. That was why her glove had burst into flame. It was as if someone had poisoned her with a toxin designed to kill not her body but her soul.

Overhead, thunder rumbled. The rain poured down. Off in the distance, their headlights gleaming and their tires splashing up water, cars jammed the major highways of the beleaguered city as people attempted to evacuate.

For the tenth time, Rogue resolved to call the other X-Men for help. Her hand shaking, she fumbled the black plastic cylinder of her Global Comm-Stat Unit from an inner pocket of her jacket. Inside her, the part that was Helen crowed and capered in delight. The vampire *wanted* her to run to her teammates, because, much as she hungered for the vitality of ordinary mortals, she craved the life force of superhumans even more.

How could Rogue subject her friends to such a danger? For that matter, how could she face them after what she'd already

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done to Ororo? Snarling in despair, she clenched her fist, pulverizing the apparatus in her grasp.

"Rogue," someone whispered.

Startled, the mutant jerked around. No one else was on the roof. She wondered if Helen was speaking to her, and, in her muddled state, she'd mistaken the quasi-hallucination for a real sound.

"Rogue." This time the voice was slightly louder. Loud enough for her to perceive it as deep, mellifluous, and masculine, and therefore probably not a manifestation of the malevolent spirit contaminating her own.

"Who are you?" the mutant asked. "Please go away. I'm dangerous."

The newcomer chuckled. "Not to me, I promise." Listening to him, Rogue suddenly felt a surge of elation, like a lost child sighting her mother, or a woman seeing the love of her life unexpectedly step from a crowd. She didn't truly recognize the voice she was hearing, yet somehow she felt as if she did.

"Where are you?" she repeated.

"Directly in front of you. Well, not entirely, not in the flesh, but you'll be able to see me if you gaze with the eyes of the spirit."

Rogue peered as hard as she could, and eventually she did see him, a blurry, translucent image hanging in the air. His features seemed especially indistinct, as if mere mortals weren't permitted to behold them in all their glory, but she could make out brown hair, a tall, imposing frame, archaic crimson clothing, a golden amulet and a wristband, and a long, heavy sword in a scabbard. His purple-lined cloak seemed to hang a bit unevenly, fuller on the left than the right, as if he had the arm on the latter side tucked behind his back.

"Who are you?" she breathed.

"A friend," he replied, "come to help in your hour of need."

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Despite the hope that the figure in red inspired, Rogue's eyes narrowed. "That answer's a little short on detail."

"I know," replied the man with the sword. "But there are levels of reality where the inhabitants don't use names, just as there are questions that don't have simple answers."

"Are you saying you're an angel?" She realized she was jumping to conclusions, yet, the way the apparition made her feel, it was astonishingly easy to believe.

The caped man smiled. Rogue sensed it somehow, even though the apparition's features were still veiled, and despite her distress, fleetingly smiled in return. "That, I suppose, is a question of perspective. Suffice it to say, I've been watching you for a long while. Don't you sense that to be so?"

She did. The swordsman was a stranger, yet not. Somehow they shared a bond. "Can you cure me?"

"Yes. I can take away your pain. More than that, I can lead you to your destiny, a glorious culmination like no other since the advent of humanity. Your current state, noisome though it seems, has a higher purpose than torment. It will prepare you to remake the world."

The phantasm's words made Rogue feel proud and full of wonder. But they frustrated her as well, because she really didn't understand them, though she felt that she should. If only she could clear the fog from her head! "What are you talking about? Tell me what you mean!"

The apparition sighed. "Once again, child, the explanation is long and involved, and as we dawdle here, your dark sister is enslaving you." As if on cue, Rogue experienced a pang of hunger so keen that, shaking, she had to grit her teeth to hold in a moan. "Can't you simply trust me?"

"I don't know. I'm confused. I want to."

"Then do it. Come to my sanctuary and let me take your pain away. Come swiftly, before the hunger masters you, and you kill again."

Rogue flinched. "I—I really did kill Storm?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure? I know I broke off the transfer before her heart stopped." Actually, she wasn't sure, but she'd been clinging desperately to the hope.

"Yes, but you stole her power and then you let her fall."

"But maybe I didn't take every bit of it! We've all cheated certain death a hundred times!"

"No one cheats it forever," said the swordsman gently. "Remember, you went back to look for her and found nothing, because by that time, the river had swept her lifeless body far downstream."

"Poor 'Roro," whispered Rogue, her eyes stinging. "I'm so sorry."

"I beg you to put yourself in my hands," said the swordsman. "While we still have time to avert another such tragedy."

"All right," said Rogue, "What have I got to lose? No matter who you are, there's nothing you or anyone could do to make the situation worse." The decision eased her anguished mind at once. Indeed, she felt a glow of profound satisfaction, as if she'd just completed a difficult and important task.

"Thank you," said the figure in red. "Bless you for your faith. Follow this vision, and it will guide you—" His speech faltered, perhaps because Rogue had frowned abruptly.

Why should she feel satisfied, when all she'd done of late was kill Storm and threaten other innocent people? The emotion made no sense, which suggested that it rightfully belonged to Helen. Perhaps much of what she'd been feeling, her immediate inclination to regard the swordsman as some sort of exalted being and do whatever he asked, had flowed from the vampire as well. And if it was Helen who worshipped the stranger, then Rogue had every reason to distrust him.

"No!" she snapped. "Forget it! What kind of sucker do you think I am? I'm not following you anywhere until you

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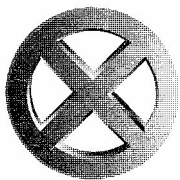
give me some solid information. For all I know, you set me up to drain Helen just so I would hand myself over to you.”

Once again, she could feel the apparition smile, but this time, there was nothing beatific or reassuring about it. “Bravo, X-Man. You have sharper wits than I gave you credit for. More resiliency of spirit as well, to resist the possession as well as you have. Alas, it won’t matter in the long run.”

“That’s what you think. Whatever happens, I’ll never give myself up to you now.”

“Don’t be naïve. Of course you will. Your mind will crumble until you no longer even remember this conversation. Your hunger will grow until you’re willing to do anything, anything at all, to rid yourself of the burden, and if by some fluke you resist me even then, Helen will still destroy your soul. I know, I envenomed her spirit with enchantments devised to achieve that very purpose. In the end, there will be no one left inside that pretty head but her, and then she will perform the sacred task that you were born to accomplish.”

Rogue screamed as she hurled herself at the stranger. Laughing, the translucent image vanished.



CHAPTER 4



The short, muscular man with the black muttonchop whiskers regarded the articles laid out on his bed. His Stetson and fleece-lined jacket. A canteen. An extra plaid flannel shirt, a pair of faded blue jeans, socks, and underwear. A mess kit. A coffee pot and a packet of strong Jamaican java. A box of Fuente Fuente Opus cigars and a Savinelli lighter, a silver flask, and a paperback copy of *The Pillow-Book of Sei Shonagon* in the original Japanese. And his leather backpack to hold it all.

Since he was already wearing his freshly waterproofed hiking boots, it looked as if he had everything. Of course, most outdoorsmen would never have considered venturing into the wildest reaches of the Canadian Rockies without a number of other items: a knife, a hatchet, a first aid kit, rations, a compass, and a map, for starters. But a guy who could pop foot-long, razor-sharp claws out of the backs of his hands didn't need cutting implements, and if he also possessed bones reinforced with the unbreakable alloy adamantium and a metabolism that could heal wounds and shed illnesses in a matter of minutes, he didn't have much use for bandages and aspirin, either. As for the rest, well, the mutant called Logan could have survived comfortably if someone had dropped him down in the wilderness stark naked. He knew because he'd done it. For him, the meager collection of amenities he'd assembled was roughly the equivalent of a fully stocked luxury RV, and indeed, contemplating it now, he snorted and told himself he was getting soft.

There was one article he was especially eager to leave behind, and that was the yellow, black, and blue battlesuit he wore when operating as Wolverine. Not that he disliked being

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an X-Man. In his less cynical moments, he believed in Charley Xavier's dream, just as he liked his teammates most of the time. They even liked him in return, and that, he often felt, given the more abrasive facets of his personality, could fairly be considered a minor miracle. But for the moment, he'd had his fill. The X-Men's latest adventure saw him nearly getting mauled by velociraptors in prehistoric times, being charbroiled by a super-villain on a South Seas island, and staving off acid-bleeding alien slugs on a far-future space station. The animal that lived inside his skin was restless. He needed to get away by himself for awhile, somewhere where there weren't any buildings, babbling televisions, rumbling motors, stinking exhaust fumes, or threats of any kind to the future of humanity and let the beast run free.

The phone on the night stand chimed. A scowl twisted his rugged, dark-eyed features into something that had more than once frozen would-be assailants dead in their tracks. Then he picked up the phone. "Yeah," he growled.

"Logan," said the baritone voice of Scott Summers. The senior X-Man, the first mutant Xavier had ever recruited, was a sober sort at the best of times, and when something was actually wrong, as it apparently was now, he could sound positively funereal. "I'm glad I caught you."

"You didn't," said Wolverine.

"Excuse me?"

"It don't matter that I ain't hit the road yet. I already started my leave, and right now I don't care if you got Magneto kidnapping the Commissioner of Baseball or Apocalypse at the front door delivering a candygram. Whatever's going on, if it's too heavy for the team you got left to deal with, hand it off to the Avengers. Let them earn their keep for once."

"I wish I could, but this is about two of our own. We don't know for certain yet, but it's possible something's happened to Rogue and Ororo."

Logan sighed. If there was a chance that any of his team-

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mates was in danger, then of course walking away was out of the question. "Where are you?"

"In the main computer room with Jean."

"I'm on my way." Wolverine dropped the phone back onto its cradle and headed for the door.

As he strode through the airy, spacious second floor of the mansion, past the doors to the bedrooms of his fellow X-Men, he couldn't help noticing how quiet the building was. Periodically his hypersensitive nose caught the scents of his teammates. The musk of Hank McCoy's fur. The tickling frozen smell-that-wasn't-a-smell of Bobby Drake's ice form. The gun-oil tang that clung to Bishop and the lavender sweetness of the bath oil Psylocke favored. But none of the smells was fresh, and for some reason, its immaculately maintained opulence notwithstanding, the huge house felt not merely vacant but abandoned, as if none of his friends were ever coming back.

Grimacing, Wolverine strove to shrug off his sense of foreboding. He descended the curved staircase to the foyer, then stalked on through Xavier's study, an oak-paneled room decorated with a set of delicate Venetian crystal goblets, Roman and Crusader coins excavated in Jerusalem, a Masai spear and wicker shield, an Egyptian scarab, prayer rug, and hookah, and other mementos gathered from around the world. Like Logan, Charley had done a fair amount of wandering in his time, before a battle with the alien marauder called Lucifer deprived him of the use of his legs. As in most other sections of the mansion, the furnishings here had been carefully placed to facilitate the passage of the crippled telepath's hoverchair.

Beyond the study was the primary computer room, filled with gleaming gray banks of machines that were more than the equal of anything that NASA or the Pentagon could muster. Geniuses like Reed Richards, Tony Stark, Forge, and Xavier himself had designed the equipment, the capabilities of which had subsequently been augmented with the advanced

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technology of the Shi'ar, whose intergalactic empire the X-Men had saved from annihilation a time or two.

Scott Summers was tall, lean, and brown-haired, with a severe set to his mouth that sometimes made Logan think of black-clad Puritans shunning temptation in colonial New England. In contrast, Jean was a lovely redhead with bright green eyes, whose features generally reflected a sweetness and vivacity so endearing that they could often charm even her dour husband into relaxing and having fun, though she looked as worried as he did at the moment.

Like Wolverine, the pair were dressed in casual civilian clothing, with nothing to hint at their mutant powers but the heavy red wraparound glasses—more like safety goggles than an ordinary pair of spectacles—that covered Cyclops's eyes. Scott had to wear some sort of covering made of ruby quartz over his eyes every moment of his life, to restrain the scarlet energy that would otherwise erupt from his pupils and blast anything in front of him, a concern that partially accounted for his sobriety. Logan supposed that the loss of his family when he was only a boy and his subsequent placement in an orphanage probably hadn't done much to lighten him up either.

Phoenix was seated in front of one of the terminals, its monitor currently tuned to WNN. A steaming cup of herbal tea—comfrey leaf with lemon, by the smell of it—sat near the keyboard. Cyke stood beside her with his hand on her shoulder. When Logan had first joined the X-Men, the pair were already lovers but not yet married, and, smitten with Jean and chafing under Scott's no-nonsense authority as field commander, he'd foolishly aspired to take her away from him. But that had been a long time ago. In the years since, he'd come to accept that the bond between them was unassailable, and even to regard the both of them as friends, or at least he thought he had. But now, seeing them so close together, touching, he felt a pang of heartache and resentment.

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Man, thought Logan, disgusted with himself, *I must be even more burned out than I thought. I have got to get away from this lunatic asylum for awhile.* Struggling to quash the jealousy churning inside him, he said, "Tell me."

"I wish there were more to tell," said Jean. "What it comes down to is that we haven't heard from Rogue and Storm since they set down in Natchez last night, so I thought I'd check on them telepathically." She maintained a constant, passive psychic link with all the members of the team, and could activate it at will in times of need. "No matter how hard I try, I can't reach them."

"Any other time, that would bother me too," said Logan, and that was no bull. He had the utmost respect for Jean's psionic abilities. "But right now, you're beat. You've been through the wringer just like the rest of us. Maybe you just don't have enough juice left to reach a coupla minds hundreds of miles away."

"Unfortunately, that's not it," said Phoenix, lifting her hand and placing it over Scott's. "I am tired, but if I push hard, I can pick up everyone else, and they're all a lot farther away. It's only Ororo and Rogue that I can't sense."

"Could it be atmospherics?" asked Wolverine. "That's a hell of a storm hanging over Natchez. That's why they went there."

"That wouldn't usually interfere with telepathy," the red-head replied.

"What would?" Logan said. Actually, he'd been working with mentalists long enough to have a pretty good idea already, but he'd learned during his years as a Canadian intelligence agent that this kind of methodical exploration, not skipping any steps, was the best way to make sure you understood the parameters of a situation.

"Some sort of psi shield," said Jean. "Or perhaps something that altered or dampened Rogue and Storm's brain waves

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to such a degree that I can't recognize them anymore. Drugs could conceivably do it."

Or death, thought Wolverine. *Death dampens brain waves real good*. Reminding himself that Storm and Rogue were two of the most powerful X-Men, about as capable of looking after themselves as anyone he'd ever met, he tried to push the grim notion out of his head. "Okay, I get the picture. But before we go off half-cocked, have you tried the GCS linkup? Rogue and 'Roro were packing their communicators, right?" Rogue typically carried her Comm-Stat Unit in her jacket, while the windrider, whose uniform had neither pockets nor a belt, had had hers built into one of her bracelets.

"They were supposed to be," said Scott, "I was just about to try that when it occurred to me that I'd better call you first, to make sure you didn't get away." He sat down in front of the communications console and switched on the power.

It seemed to take a moment for the board to light up, as if the circuits were responding sluggishly. When the console was finally operational, Cyclops pressed the luminous, white plastic touchpad bearing Ororo's name. "Storm, do you read me?" he said.

No one replied. Static crackled from the speaker.

"Storm," Scott repeated, "this is home base. Come in."

Still no answer. Cyclops pressed Rogue's touchpad and attempted to hail her, with the same lack of results.

"Try the *Blackbird*," said Phoenix, referring to the modified SR-71 their teammates had flown to Mississippi. "Maybe they're still aboard."

Scott activated yet another touchpad. "*Blackbird*, do you read me? Respond, please."

Static.

"Atmospherics really could screw up the GCS," said Logan, "but Jeannie's psi and the communicators punking out at the same time is way too much of a coincidence for me. You were right, Cyke, they are in trouble. Maybe somebody

ambushed them." He leaned past Phoenix, grabbed her computer's mouse, dragged down a menu, and accessed the National Weather Service. The monitor displayed a radar map of North America with a crawl of text—reporting rainfall, temperature, wind speed and direction, and other meteorological data—beneath it. An angry red blotch hung over the Natchez area. "Judging from this, I'm guessing that whatever happened, it happened hours ago. It sure looks like something took Ororo out of action before she even had a chance to put a dent in the storm."

"This is my fault," said Scott. "We all should have gone."

"Don't say that," said Jean, touching him on the arm. "There was no way you could have known."

Scott shook his head. "Thanks, but that's not true. Ororo warned us there was something unnatural about the weather."

"That didn't automatically imply that somebody was going to attack her if she went out to fix it," the redhead said. "It's not as if some maniac like Moses Magnum had come forward claiming responsibility. It could have just been, I don't know, *El Niño* causing the storm."

"Still—"

Logan felt a pang of irritation. Scott second-guessing himself wasn't helping anybody. "For what it's worth," the short man interrupted, "I didn't have any kind of hunch that they were heading into trouble either. Besides, 'Roro's a field commander the same as you, so if she thought it was okay for her and Rogue to go off by themselves, that was her call to make. Now what do you say you stop whining and we get to work."

For a moment Cyclops stiffened as if he'd taken offense. Then he grimaced and said, "Right. Sorry. At this point the important thing is to find them."

"There's one more thing we can try from here," said Jean, turning toward a massive metal armchair surrounded by a ring of consoles. An oversized silver salad bowl of a helmet hung above the seat, attached to a jointed arm suspended from the

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ceiling. Depending on his mood, Logan had always thought the setup looked like it belonged either in a futuristic torture chamber or a beauty salon. "Cerebro."

Cerebro was Xavier's greatest invention, an apparatus constructed to detect the presence of super-powered mutants anywhere in the world. Part of the brilliance of its design lay in the fact that anyone with the proper training could operate it, although, based on psionic principles that Wolverine didn't pretend to understand, it worked best for a telepath.

Ordinarily, neither Jean nor Charley would bother to fire up Cerebro merely to make contact with their fellow X-Men. The telepathic bonds they'd established made it unnecessary. But now, Logan realized, Phoenix might conceivably be able to use the gizmo to augment her innate power and punch through whatever interference was blocking her out. Assuming, of course, that that was really the problem.

Logan nodded. "Give it a shot."

Jean walked over, sat down beneath the headpiece, and threw a switch on the arm of the chair. Cerebro hummed to life, and a series of icons blinked into existence on the monitor of the device's housekeeping computer. The helmet came down to cover the top half of the telepath's head. Another observer might have assumed that it had lowered itself mechanically, but Logan knew that his teammate had pulled it down with her telekinesis.

For half a minute, nothing happened, nothing perceptible to someone devoid of psi ability, anyway. Then Phoenix's back arched and her arms flailed as if she'd received an electric shock. A red bulb glowed on the console before her, and an alarm buzzer blared.

"Jean!" Cyclops cried, scrambling toward her. Wolverine was right behind him.

Once again employing her psychokinesis, Jean flung the helmet off so forcefully that it clanged against the ceiling. Shivering, her face white, she panted, "I'm all right. But

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something's wrong with Cerebro. It started pumping raw psychic noise into my brain." Her lips quirked into a wry, fleeting smile. "*Loud* raw psychic noise."

Pivoting toward the monitor, Logan saw the message SPECTRUM ANALYZER NONFUNCTIONAL displayed in a little black box. He wondered angrily which of his teammates had been responsible for checking and servicing Cerebro last, and promised himself that when he got the chance, he'd let the pinhead know what he thought about his job performance.

"Are you sure you're okay?" said Scott, touching Jean's cheek.

She nodded. "I'm fine."

"Then let's see if I can fix this thing." Crouching in front of the housekeeping computer, Cyclops called up a diagnostic program and started guiding it through its various routines. Looking on impatiently, Wolverine struggled to refrain from asking stupid questions and let his friend work. Scott wasn't a world-class scientist like Professor X or the Beast, but he had an abundance of mechanical aptitude, and was often pressed into service to repair any gadget that needed it, from blenders and toaster ovens to security doors with biomolecular locks and the presser beam projectors in the Danger Room.

Finally, frowning, he turned around. "I can't tell what's wrong," he said. "Whatever it is, it could take hours to find and correct, and then there's no guarantee it would solve our problem. We'll have to go to Natchez and search the hard way."

"Should we call back the rest of the team?" asked Jean.

Scott shook his head. "I doubt they could make it to Natchez in time to make a difference. Just talk to the Professor. Who knows, maybe *he* can find Rogue and Storm, even if he is a lot farther away. Meantime, Logan and I will get one of the auxiliary jets ready for takeoff."

"I'm on it," Phoenix said. Her green eyes widened and her face grew blank and still as her thoughts reached across

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the globe to Xavier, who was in Tokyo for a genetics conference, accompanied by Bishop and the Beast.

Logan and Scott left her to it. Impelled by a shared sense of urgency, by the time they reached the steps to the basement, they were running.

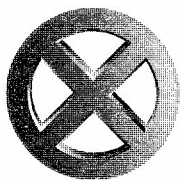
A concealed passageway connected the cellar to the first sub-basement with its medical facilities, pool, gymnasium, laboratories, and the high-speed magnetic rail system that linked the mansion to the hangars on the east side of the estate. Upon reaching the transport terminus, the two mutants scrambled aboard the first of the half dozen bullet-shaped cars waiting in line on the track. Scott hastily buckled his safety belt as proper procedure dictated. Logan didn't bother with his, just hit the start button. Their vehicle shot down the tunnel. Acceleration shoved the X-Men back in their well-cushioned seats.

"Sorry about your vacation," Cyclops said.

Logan made a spitting sound. "Don't sweat it. It's good I'm here. This is gonna be a rough one."

"I expect so, if we're going up against someone powerful enough to defeat Rogue and Storm, and neutralize Jean's psi on top of it."

"The situation could be even worse than that. What if Ororo and Rogue didn't just draw somebody's fire by showing up in the wrong place at the wrong time? What if the whole objective was to ambush them? I've got a nasty feeling that we're up against someone so smart and so savvy about us that he's playing us like a piano, and I don't like it one little bit."



CHAPTER 5



Fascinated, Carla Spelvin studied herself in the mirror of her little gold compact. Despite the loss of her reflection, she'd never quite brought herself to throw it away, and now that she could see herself once more, she was glad she hadn't.

A touch on the shoulder made her jump. Lurching about, she met the master's black, mocking eyes. "Do you approve of your new appearance?" he asked.

"Yes," Carla said. Actually, it wasn't that different from her old appearance. She and the X-Man called Rogue were both brunettes of nearly identical height and build and even had similar features. She supposed that was why the master had selected her for the task at hand. It had been relatively easy to magically transform her into the mutant's twin. Easy for him, anyway—transfixed by his sword, she'd screamed and screamed as his power hammered and twisted her into a different sort of creature.

The sorcerer ran the talon on his forefinger lightly down her cheek. "I thought you would. The mutant is beautiful, isn't she?"

Carla sensed that this was one of those occasions when it was safe to speak lightly to her lord. "*Almost* as beautiful as me."

The horned man laughed. "Petty and narcissistic as ever, even now, when the gods are about to return. I've sometimes wondered, did you yield to your sire willingly, to preserve your youthful loveliness forever?"

Carla's mouth tightened at the memory of the pain and terror of that night. "No. He jumped me outside a nightclub

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and drained me all at once. He never even spoke to me until after my resurrection.”

The man in the red cloak smiled as if the thought of her anguish amused him. “Ah. That was rather less than gallant, wasn’t it? You should have been pleased to exchange his yoke for mine.”

Carla thought wistfully that it might be nice not to be anyone’s slave, but she didn’t want to risk annoying him by saying so. “Yes, master.”

“Tell me, do you feel confident of your new abilities? Are you comfortable in Rogue’s skin?”

“Sure.” It was a half truth. She’d flown about, hefted and broken various objects, until she had a good sense of her new capabilities. But comfortable? Reshaped in the mutant’s image, she was so much stronger that it was intoxicating, yet sometimes frightening as well. As an ordinary vampire, she’d felt as if she were a being of cold stone and iron, indestructible and eternal. Now, at certain moments, her new power made her feel more like gossamer and glass, too frail to long contain the energies burning inside her.

She tried not to worry about it. No matter what happened to her now, the master had promised her life and glory in the world to come, and since she had no choice but to obey him in any case, that would have to be enough.

“Good,” the horned man said, “because it’s time for you to begin your impersonation. Rogue has taken the hook, but she’s still fighting. It will take a bit of time to reel her in.”

And meanwhile, Carla knew, her job was to create enough turmoil and confusion to prevent anyone from interfering. “I won’t let you down,” she said.

“Of course not,” the sorcerer said. “You know better. And since you already have your instructions, I suppose that nothing remains but to give you my blessing.”

She knelt, and he pressed his hand against her forehead. A

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sharp sting, like a shock of static electricity, passed from his flesh to hers.

"Now go," he said.

The vampire rose and, pulling on her brown leather jacket with the red and black X patch on the sleeve, walked to one of the tall, Gothic-style matchboarded doors in the vestibule. Beyond it, the wind whined, and rain drummed on the panel. She gripped the handle and then, despite herself, she faltered. In the end, it was her intense awareness of the master's scrutiny that impelled her to crack open the door.

With mountainous black clouds blanketing the sky, the world outside was nearly as dark as the shadowy recesses of the master's sanctum. Nevertheless, Carla could instantly feel that it was daylight spilling through the opening, hot and stinging on her face.

She flinched, but at the same time perceived that the adulterated sunlight wasn't burning her. Transformed as she was, she could bear it, at least while the overcast endured, and she knew the master would maintain it as long as it served his purposes. Her fear fell away from her and she vaulted into the sky.

Rather enjoying the harsh, cold kiss of the weather, she flew back and forth across the part of the city to which her master had directed her, looking for a good place to begin her work. Below her, the river rose, traffic jammed the highways leading out of town, and mortals labored like ants to secure their property. After a few minutes, a wailing siren snagged her attention. Emergency lights flashing and tires splashing up water, an orange and white ambulance had just pulled away from a fire station on Winchester Road.

Carla grinned. Everybody admired emergency workers, just as everyone was counting on them to help Natchez cope with the storm. If she wanted to rouse panic and outrage, she could hardly pick better targets.

She was some distance from Winchester Road, but that was

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all right. In Rogue's form, she could fly much faster than the ambulance was traveling. She streaked in front of it, then dove, fists clenched and extended.

The emergency vehicle loomed larger and larger. Back when she was a teenager, she'd once ridden in a car while the driver, her date, played chicken. For a moment, she felt much the same fear as she had then. The desperate urge to pull out of her dive was almost impossible to resist. But she was certain that her new powers would see her through the next few moments, and she wanted to make her debut as Rogue as spectacular as possible.

Since she was swooping down from above, the two EMTs behind the wheel didn't see her until the last second. The driver froze, staring in horror. His partner opened his mouth as if to scream.

Then Carla smashed through the nose of the ambulance and the motor beyond. For an instant, the world was a chaos of crashing, crumpling metal dividing before her, and then she was clear. She'd passed completely through the vehicle, and, moving slower now, much of her momentum spent, was flying on down the street. Her body smarted from the impact, but as she'd predicted, she wasn't injured.

Split nearly in two, its tires flat, the ambulance spun, then fell on its side. Carla flew to the front of it and peered through the cracked glass. The driver was unconscious or dead, bits of shrapnel protruding from his flesh, his entire body covered in blood. The sight of it made Carla's mouth water, even though the master's enchantments had taken away her hunger. Old habits died hard, she supposed. The EMT hanging in the passenger seat, a skinny young black man with a shaved head, struggled spastically with the buckle of his safety belt, but couldn't get it open. It looked to Carla as if both his arms were broken.

When he noticed her leering in at him, he recoiled. "Don't hurt me!" he whimpered.

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"Don't worry, sugar," she said, putting on Rogue's honed Southern drawl. Having grown up in Duluth herself, she had to fake it. "It's only gonna hurt for one more second." She rose into the air, pressed her yellow-gloved hands against the side of the cab, and then pushed violently downward. With a groan of tortured metal, the compartment collapsed, crushing the bodies inside.

Carla turned toward the red brick firehouse down the street. No doubt drawn by the noise of the crash, a dozen firefighters and EMTs stood gaping at her. She flew in their direction, and they scurried back inside.

By the time she landed in the driveway, the electric door to the station garage was rumbling down. Since it couldn't possibly keep her out, she let it descend while she stood and recited her speech.

"I'm Rogue of the X-Men," she called, "and I'm here to deliver a message. My teammates and I have spent the last few years protecting you *Homo sapiens* from super-villains and alien invaders. We did it to show you that mutants could be your friends. To persuade y'all to stop persecuting us, in America and all around the world. But no matter how many times we risked our necks for you, nothing ever changed.

"So it looks like we're going to have to convince y'all another way. We're starting up what my friend Cyclops calls a policy of retribution. That means that as long as y'all keep persecuting us, we're going to persecute you back."

The door bumped shut.

"Now, it would be nice if you flatscans would just take our word for it and change your wicked ways, but we know you better than that. It won't happen unless we prove we mean what we say. So we're going to make an example, and do some damage in this little ol' town. It's a shame, but it'll also be just a drop in the bucket compared to what humans have done to our kind over the years."

She smiled at the fire station. She couldn't see any faces at

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the windows, but she was sure the people inside were listening. "Any questions, comments, or begging for mercy? No? Good, let's have some fun." She walked forward, bursting through the garage door as if it were made of paper.

On the other side were another ambulance, a gleaming red hook-and-ladder truck that reminded her fleetingly of her little brother's favorite toy, and the traditional brass pole for the firefighters to slide down. Beyond them, a man in a yellow slicker and firefighter's helmet was jabbering frantically into the phone mounted on the back wall.

As Carla advanced on him, she heard stealthy footsteps on the other side of the hook-and-ladder. Now that she was inside the building, someone was trying to use the truck for cover, sneak past her, and get out. She shoved the long, gleaming vehicle as hard as she could. It tumbled over the people behind it and crashed through an interior wall.

Evidently that particular wall had helped to support the upper story, because now the whole building groaned, and bits of ceiling showered down in her white-streaked hair. For a moment it seemed that the place was going to fall down, which, now that she thought about it, wasn't such a bad idea.

The firefighter dropped the phone and turned to scramble through a doorway. Carla flew forward, grabbed him, and lifted him off his feet. "Did you tell the police I'm here?" she asked, holding him at the end of one outstretched arm. "Did you tell them what I said?"

A rather handsome young man in a wholesome, Norman Rockwell sort of way, her captive goggled down at her with a pair of striking brown eyes.

"Answer me, darlin'," the vampire said. "You don't want to be rude and make me cross, now do you?"

"Yes," the fireman stammered, "I mean, no! I mean, I told them."

"Then there's that taken care of," Carla said. "Thank you

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very kindly." She gave him a shake like a cat shaking a rat. His neck broke with an audible snap.

As she dropped him, another firefighter, this one a beefy, grizzled man with a ruddy complexion, burst screaming through the door with an ax raised over his head. Caught by surprise, she was too slow to avoid his attack, but of course it didn't matter. The ax bounced off her forehead and sent him staggering off balance.

Before he could recover, she struck him a backhand blow to the chest. He flew across the garage, smashed into the brass pole, which bent at the impact, and sprawled motionless on the oil-stained concrete floor.

No one else rushed forth to attack her. Evidently the other humans were all either scrambling to get out of the fire station or cowering in one hiding place or another. The runners had a chance. The hiders were out of luck.

She picked up the ambulance and used it like a battering ram, smashing one section of wall after another. She thought she'd be able to judge when the building was ready to collapse and have an instant to get clear, but it didn't happen that way. The ceiling suddenly slammed down like a colossal fist.

The impact hurt fiercely, stunned her for a moment, but once again, lying in blackness, buried in rubble, she could tell that she wasn't seriously injured. Thrashing, flying upward, she fought her way clear of the debris and on up into the sky. Inspecting her handiwork—a chaotic tangle of shattered brick in which she could glimpse a couple of mangled bodies—she felt a glow of satisfaction.

She knew that this phase of her mission had been the easiest. From here on out, the authorities would be looking for her. But even if they caught up with her, what could they possibly do to bring her down? Grinning, she hurtled away from the carnage, looking for a good place to go to ground until it was time to strike again.

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Muir Island was a rugged crescent of rock jutting from the sea off the northwestern coast of Scotland. Generally Piotr Rasputin found a stark beauty in the place, in the gray-green waves battering themselves to foam at the base of the cliffs and the mosses, shrubs, and gnarled, stunted trees clinging stubbornly to life on the crags, a beauty he'd tried to capture on canvas many times. But now, listening to the moaning of the frigid wind and the ceaseless booming of the surf, he saw how black the night was with no artificial light shining anywhere except for what leaked from the sprawling high-tech research facility at his back. And he couldn't help thinking how bleak and isolated the island truly was. A fitting site for ghastly events to happen, as they nearly had on more occasions than he cared to recall.

He was currently seven and a half feet tall, with a brawny organic steel body that gleamed in the moonlight, and despite the darkness, he felt conspicuous. He could almost envy Kurt, whose dark blue fur made him virtually invisible in shadow—Piotr knew where his friend was crouching just a few feet away, yet couldn't see him at all. Or the slight Kitty Pryde with her curly brown hair and dark costume, whose ninja skills rendered her as difficult to spot as Nightcrawler. Or even Amanda, who, though clad in the bright yellow battlesuit she often wore when serving with Excalibur, was still less likely to catch an enemy's eye than the towering man of metal called Colossus.

But actually, it was good that Piotr was by far the most visible, because once he'd shifted from flesh to steel, almost nothing could hurt him. If he and his friends had been set up, if someone was actually planning to attack them, then he wanted to be the one to draw the enemy's fire.

He just wished—

"Where *is* he?" murmured Amanda fretfully, more or less completing Piotr's thought.

"Patience, *liebchen*," said Kurt. Piotr saw the sheen of his

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comrade's eerie yellow eyes, but no other hint of the contours of his body. If Colossus hadn't known better, he might have thought the twin orbs were floating unsupported in space.

"It's okay if you want to get out of here," said Kitty to Amanda. "This creep has put you through too much already."

"I agree," said Piotr. As he understood it, after her possession ended, the sorceress had awakened with no real memory of what had transpired, but wracked with a sickening sense of violation. "Just because he said he wanted all four of us—"

Amanda grimaced. "Thank you for trying to spare me, but I want to be here. To face my fear. I can't go through life wondering who invaded me like that. I need to look him in the eye."

"And so you shall," said a deep voice with a trace of an Eastern European accent.

His heart jolting in his breast, Colossus lurched around. He'd never dropped his guard, yet he hadn't sensed the intruder approaching, and his teammates obviously hadn't either.

A tall man wrapped in a voluminous black cloak stepped from the darkness between the edge of the cliff and the round concrete helipad. The high collar of his mantle framed a haughty, aristocratic face, with pallid skin, an aquiline nose, bushy black brows, and a neatly trimmed mustache and goatee. Intelligence shone from his deep-set crimson eyes, just as there was cruel humor manifest in the quirk of his full, sensuous lips. The nails of his white hands were so long and pointed that, on a figure less imposing, they might have seemed effeminate.

Piotr felt his mouth turn dry. His friends occasionally chided him for what they perceived as a propensity for self-doubt, and he supposed they had a point. But self-doubt was by no means the same thing as timidity, and after all he'd been through since Professor Xavier brought him away from his home among the grain fields of Siberia to use his powers in the service of humanity, few dangers could daunt him any-

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more. The being in front of him, however, was one of them. A demon in the guise of a man, whom the world at large believed to be merely a myth or a figment of a Victorian novelist's imagination, but whom the X-Men had discovered to be all too real.

The cloaked man inclined his head. "Colossus." He turned toward Amanda. "Miss Sefton." He pivoted on toward Kitty's place of concealment. Obviously her ninjutsu hadn't hidden her from him. "Shadowcat." He shifted once more, to stare directly at Kurt. "And Nightcrawler."

"Dracula," the German mutant answered coldly. Clad in his red, blue, and white costume, his razor-sharp saber sheathed on his back, Kurt emerged from the shadows. Superficially, with his pointed tail and other features, Nightcrawler resembled the popular conception of an evil supernatural creature more than the vampire did. But to Piotr's eyes at least, the contrast between the two could scarcely have been greater. Kurt's tone of voice and body language bespoke a staunch and thoroughly human determination to protect his teammates and himself, and, underlying that, an anxiety masked so well that only one of his closest friends could have sensed it. Dracula, on the other hand, radiated a diabolical malevolence so repugnant that he almost seemed to reek like the ancient, lifeless thing he truly was.

"I assume you were expecting me," the vampire said. "Otherwise my opinion of your intelligence will decline yet another notch."

"Yes," said Kurt, "we suspected it was you. You gave me enough clues. You made it clear that you'd met us all back when we were X-Men, before the founding of Excalibur. You knew I was a Christian. You threatened to impale Amanda, your favorite form of torture and execution during the Middle Ages. You wanted to meet at night, to avoid the sun. And outside our home, because you would have had difficulty en-

tering without being invited. I only doubted my guess because I thought you had to sleep during the day."

"A partial misconception. I'm physically dormant—which was precisely why I had to possess Miss Sefton to communicate with you—but I can become psychically active if the need arises."

"We also thought—and hoped—that poor Rachel van Helsing really did destroy you back in that castle in Cornwall," Kitty said in her Midwestern American accent. Piotr knew that the gibe was her way of managing her own uneasiness.

Dracula gave her an unpleasant smile. "Oh, she did, but death isn't the same for me as it is for one of you mortals. I've found my way back from the great darkness on several occasions."

"You want to try it again?" Kitty asked.

The vampire sneered. "Brash as ever. You should guard your tongue, little girl. I remember a world where peasants who spoke insolently lost their tongues, and that was if their lord was feeling merciful. Rest assured, that world will come again."

"Don't count on it," Nightcrawler said. "But we didn't come here to trade threats. You said we have business to discuss, so let's get to it. What could you possibly want from us, of all people?"

"I want you to help me destroy an enemy."

"In your dreams," said Shadowcat. "Any enemy of yours is good people as far as we're concerned."

"Indeed," said Dracula. "Even if the enemy is Belasco?"

Piotr tensed. Belasco was the sorcerer who'd trapped his beloved younger sister Illyana in the mystical dimension called Limbo. For Colossus, only a few seconds elapsed before she returned, but for Illyana, seven years had passed, years of torment during which Belasco had done his utmost to corrupt her, to make her his willing bride and accomplice in his

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schemes to liberate the Elder Gods. Though she eventually won free, the horned man had stolen her childhood, left an indelible scar on her spirit, and, by awakening her mutant powers and magical ability, arguably set her on the path that ultimately led to her death. Piotr felt an instinctive loathing for Dracula, but he *hated* Belasco as he'd never hated any other foe.

"What do you know about Belasco?" the Russian demanded.

"Ah," said the vampire, "I see I've roused your interest."

"Answer him," said Kitty, her pretty young face looking almost as grim as Piotr felt. Illyana had been her best friend.

"I intend to," Dracula said. "I assume you recall the Montesi Formula. It figured rather prominently in our last encounter."

"The spell from the *Darkhold* grimoire," said Kurt, "for killing vampires."

Dracula inclined his head. "Later on, Stephen Strange used the ritual to obliterate every vampire on the face of the Earth. As you can imagine, after I rose from the ashes, my first priority was to roam the globe creating new progeny."

"What does this have to do with Belasco?" Piotr said.

"Patience, X-Man, and you shall hear. I normally maintain a vague psychic connection with all my brood, but one such link, to a certain coven I recently founded, faded abruptly. When I investigated at long range, using various methods of divination, I determined that the vampires in question had renounced me in favor of a new lord."

"Belasco?" Piotr asked.

"Yes."

"But isn't that impossible?" asked Amanda, frowning.

"So I had always believed," Dracula said wryly. "According to the tradition of my people, the only way a *nosferatu* can repudiate the authority of his king is to challenge him to a duel, destroy him, and assume the throne himself. But it

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would appear that there are few absolutes in this world, at least where powerful sorcerers are involved."

"What would Belasco want with your coven?" asked Kurt.

"That," Dracula said, "I could not determine. Naturally, I swore to punish the usurper and my rebellious subjects also, but I didn't turn my hand to the task immediately. I had other concerns which seemed more urgent. But now, suddenly, I sense from certain disturbances in the ether that Belasco may finally be on the brink of freeing the Dark Ones, as he's aspired to do for nigh unto seven hundred years. Someone had better deal with him immediately, or it may be too late. And although I'm the single most formidable entity in the world, in some conflicts even I require troops to help me crush the foe."

"But why us?" Nightcrawler asked. At the base of the escarpment, the waves hissed and crashed. "Why not use other vampires?"

"Two reasons," Dracula said. "Belasco has already subverted the loyalty of one circle of undead. For all I know, he could do it again, with a snap of his fingers. I also know you've vanquished the wretch before. Now, will you help me? If not, I must take my leave to make other arrangements."

"We need to confer," said Kurt. "Will you wait here?"

"If I must."

The German mutant led his teammates back inside the entrance hall of their headquarters. Colossus realized that Kurt wanted to make sure that the vampire, with his inhumanly keen senses, wouldn't be able to eavesdrop on their conversation, but understanding failed to allay the impatience seething inside him.

"What is there to talk about?" he asked as soon as Kurt closed the heavy oak door with its core of nickel-titanium alloy. "If Belasco has come back, we have to go after him."

"What he said," Kitty added.

"Yes," said Nightcrawler, "but is Belasco back? We only

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have Dracula's word for it. He might be trying to sucker us into a trap."

"Why?" asked Shadowcat. "Why even mess with us when we thought he was dead? I mean, really dead, not just his normal dead."

"To avenge his defeats at our hands. To take us hostage and use us to get at Storm." They'd originally met Dracula when he'd attempted to claim their teammate Ororo to be his undead queen. "To turn us into mutant-powered 'progeny.' To kill us now because he figures he'll have to do it at some point in order to conquer the world. The possibilities are endless." Kurt turned toward Amanda. "Do you have any sense of his real intentions?"

The blonde sorceress shook her head. "His aura is black with evil. Every time I look at it, I feel like I'm drowning in sewage. But that's just his true nature showing. I can't tell if he specifically intends to do us harm. I do know that no matter how powerful he is, I hate the thought of heading into danger with a creature like him beside us. We'd be better off tackling Belasco by ourselves."

"I think so too," said Kurt. "but Dracula would never agree to it. Assuming he's telling the truth, he has a personal score to settle. And as things stand now, he's indispensable, because he was careful not to give us the slightest clue where this rebel coven is. So unless you can sniff Belasco out..."

Looking chagrined, Amanda said, "Considering that he could be anywhere in the world, and may well have cast spells of concealment, it would take me a very long time if it's even possible."

"Then we'll have to work with Dracula or not at all."

"By the White Wolf!" Piotr exclaimed. "This is nonsense! I'm going to find Belasco whatever the rest of you decide!"

Nightcrawler grimaced. "Calm down, *mein freund*. I remember the hellish wasteland Limbo was, and I suspect that was a tropical resort compared to what Belasco's gods would

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make of the Earth. Of course, we all have to go. But perhaps we can buy a bit of insurance first."

Kitty quizzically cocked her head. "How?"

"To us, Dracula is a monster and a fiend. But in his own mind, he's an aristocrat. A feudal warlord and a man of honor. Perhaps we can turn that to our advantage. When we get back out there, let me do the talking."

They walked back into the night. When he and his companions came close enough, Piotr saw the king of the undead standing motionless, with only the inky folds of his cloak and stray strands of his raven hair stirring in the cold, damp wind. With his white face and hands, he looked almost like a marble statue that someone had dressed in real clothing. "Well?" he said.

"One question," Kurt replied. "How do we know we can trust you?"

Dracula raised an eyebrow. "You insult me, X-Man. Do you fear that I'm lying, or that I'll turn my coat? If memory serves, it was your doppelgänger who gleefully embraced the chance to serve as Belasco's groveling lackey."

Kurt scowled. During their first encounter with Belasco, the X-Men had discovered to their consternation that he'd already crushed another incarnation of the team, one evidently hailing from an alternate universe. He'd slain some members, the other Piotr included, and displayed their remains as trophies. Even more horribly, he'd somehow degraded Nightcrawler's counterpart into a willing, sadistic slave, a creature like the imp he so resembled.

"And you, Piotr Nikolievitch Rasputin," the vampire continued. Caught by surprise, the mutant gave a start. "You forsook the X-Men to throw in with one of their greatest enemies. Later you likewise deserted Magneto's camp. Then you made your way here, and in a fit of jealous rage, savagely attacked a fellow champion of goodness named Wisdom, simply be-

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cause he dared to love your little Katya here—" he leered at Shadowcat "—even though you'd cast her off long before."

"It . . . it wasn't like you're making it sound!" Colossus said, although in his heart, he often felt that it was. How the devil could Dracula know all the most shameful mistakes he'd ever made?

Kitty touched him on the arm. "Take it easy, Petey. You don't have to defend yourself to *him*."

"Perhaps not," Dracula said, "but the fact remains that for all your heroic pretensions, you X-Men are manifestly as capable of treachery as anyone else. Perhaps I should be begging assurances of you."

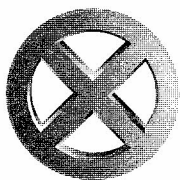
"You can have them," Nightcrawler said. "We promise to treat you as an ally for the duration of the mission. Will you do the same?"

"If I must," the vampire said. "I swear on my honor as *Domnul* of Wallachia, Knight of the the Dragon, and King of the Undead that I will comport myself as your faithful comrade until Belasco is defeated." He sneered. "Does that oath satisfy you, mutant?"

"I guess it'll have to," said Kurt. "As you asked, the *Midnight Runner* is ready for takeoff. Where are we going?"

"I'll tell you once we're in the air," Dracula replied.

"So much for camaraderie," Kitty said.



CHAPTER 6



Scott, Jean, and Logan climbed from the X-Men's newly acquired Cessna Citation X into the pounding rain. Despite the instant drenching, Cyclops was glad to be on the ground. Though the Citation lacked the VTOL capabilities of the *Blackbird*, it had been modified to take off and land in a fraction of the space required by any normal jet. Still, setting it down on a bumpy stretch of grass in foul weather was scarcely his idea of fun.

Bundled up in a blue poncho, Laurel Smith trudged out through mud and puddles to greet the new arrivals. A petite middle-aged woman with a wide, humorous mouth and brown, wrinkled, sun-damaged skin, Laurel was a mutant with a low-grade pyrokinetic talent, which, though the fires it kindled were no larger or hotter than those produced by an ordinary match, had nonetheless caused her no end of trouble until Professor Xavier taught her to control it. In appreciation, she'd joined the underground network of well-wishers who supported the X-Men in a variety of ways. In this instance, her contribution was allowing them to use her farm as a makeshift airfield.

"How was your flight?" she asked.

"Fine," said Cyclops. In reality, landing hadn't been the only dicey part. Battered by the storm and plagued by intermittent instrument malfunctions and an odd, worrisome undertone to the drone of the engines, he'd found the entire journey relatively nerve-racking, even for an expert pilot who'd survived dogfights and antiaircraft fire in his time. But he didn't want to waste time going into it when there was more important work to be done.

The wind gusted, and rain slipped down the collar of the

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tan trenchcoat he'd thrown on over his blue-black and yellow uniform. He had the visored mask thrown back and a pair of his glasses on, so theoretically, he ought to pass for an ordinary civilian so long as people didn't look too closely. Clad in his cowboy hat and an oilskin duster, Wolverine was similarly disguised. For her part, Jean was dressed entirely in what appeared to be ordinary clothing. But her garments were made of unstable molecules, and using her telekinesis, she could reconfigure them into her uniform in an instant.

"Have you heard from Rogue or Storm?" Cyclops asked. Laurel shook her head. "Sorry."

"There's the *Blackbird*," said Wolverine, nodding at the sleek jet, ninety feet long and twenty feet tall, gleaming like polished obsidian in the rain. "I want to take a look inside."

They headed for the larger plane. A fork of lightning flared across the sky, and thunder boomed a second later. The wind tried to snatch Logan's beat-up old Stetson and Jean's broad-brimmed scarlet hat. He grabbed his headgear with his hand and she tugged hers firmly down with the power of her mind.

Scott pulled off one yellow synthetic leather glove, climbed the crew ladder, and pressed his hand against the biomolecular lock. For a moment, nothing happened, and then the panel rather grudgingly slid aside. The X-Men boarded the jet with Laurel tagging along behind, rubbernecking.

Jean telekinetically switched on the cabin lights, revealing the electronic countermeasures station, the display monitors, and the rest of the futuristic appointments. Logan skulked toward the nose of the plane, sniffing. "Nobody but 'Roro and Rogue has been on board lately," he said.

I could have told you that, Cyclops thought irritably. Whatever happened to them, it happened after they left here. But actually, he knew that Logan was right to check out every possibility, and chided himself for letting his irritability over the flight down creep into his thoughts.

Scott inspected the area around the pilot and copilot's seats.

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If Rogue and Storm had had some intimation that they were heading into danger, they might conceivably have left a note. But there was nothing.

He turned to Jean, who nodded before he had a chance to articulate his thoughts—not surprising, since husband and wife shared a psychic rapport, a link far stronger and more intimate than the ones she'd established with the other X-Men.

For Wolverine's benefit, she said, "Now that we're actually in Natchez, or as good as, I want to start scanning again."

Her lustrous green eyes grew wide as she stared into space. Cyclops felt her straining, felt the worry and frustration she did her best to banish, lest they undermine her ability to focus. Finally she shook her head. "I'm not getting anything that way," she said. "I'll try it with the mini-Cerebro."

She took the portable short-range unit from inside her rain-coat. Ordinarily the mini-Cerebros interfaced with the master system back in New York, but in a pinch, as now, when the machine in the mansion was out of commission, they could function independently. Though that made them less reliable, it should at least protect Jean from another painful accident.

Yet as Scott watched her activate the little black plastic box, a marvel of miniaturization scarcely larger than a deck of playing cards, he was suddenly all but certain it was going to hurt her, and nearly dashed it from her hand. Lord, but he was tired! Why did Rogue and Ororo have to stumble into trouble now? And as long as he was pondering unanswerable questions, why did he always have to feel as if it was entirely his responsibility to make sure things turned out all right?

He knew it was irrational. Jean, Logan, and the rest of the X-Men were every bit as dedicated and competent as he was. No one could ask for better teammates. Yet try as he might, he'd never been able to shake the feeling completely that it was up to him to fix everything. Maybe it had something to do with helplessly witnessing the deaths of his parents. Or

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going through life with eyes that could kill with a single unshielded glance.

Jean gazed at the mini-Cerebro for half a minute, then grimaced. "Still nothing."

"Then we'll just have to keep hunting," Wolverine said with a growl, and Scott heard the thought from him: *Is she going to be totally useless this time out?* Normally, Jean tried scrupulously to respect the privacy of other people's minds, but occasionally, especially when she was tired and her shields were a little shaky, she caught a stray flash of thought anyway, and that was what had happened now. The perception had even jumped from her mind to Scott's.

He could feel that her feelings were hurt. *He* was furious, so much so that he nearly forgot that the short man was his friend. For an instant, it was as if they were all back in the old days, when Wolverine baited him at every turn, and sometimes only his commitment to providing the kind of leadership Professor Xavier expected restrained him from pulverizing the obnoxious little jerk with his optic blasts.

Take it easy, said Jean, mind to mind. *He didn't mean it. I could feel that he was sorry as soon as he thought it. He's just worried and worn out like we are.*

I guess, Scott replied, but for the moment at least, resentment still crawled inside him. He ordered himself to put it aside and focus on the mission.

The telepathic exchange had taken only a second. Oblivious to it, Logan turned to Laurel. "Of the three of us, only Jeannie can fly. She could carry us with her, but over time it would wear her out. It would help a lot if we could get our hands on a car."

Laurel pulled a key ring from the pocket of her faded black jeans. "Take my Blazer. Just don't let it get blown up by a death ray or anything."

Wolverine gave her a smile that momentarily filled his grim

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features with warmth. "Deal. And after this mess is over, I'll treat you to the best Italian food in Natchez."

She smiled back. "How did you know I like Italian?"

He tapped the side of his nose. "I know what you had for lunch." His grin fading, turned back to his teammates. "Let's go."

Heading into town, their windshield wipers unable ever to quite clear the pounding rain from the glass, they passed solid lines of cars crawling in the opposite direction. Hoping for a news broadcast and a weather update, Scott attempted to switch on the radio, only to find that it didn't work.

In Natchez proper, to his surprise, the downpour was even harder. Some streets were already flooded, with abandoned vehicles, their tires completely submerged, protruding from the streaming gray water like islands. At one point, as they cautiously crested a hill, the X-Men saw an old white VW bug floating along the submerged cross street below toward an overflowing drainage canal. The driver, an elderly woman with a red scarf tied over her silvery curls, sat helplessly weeping behind the wheel. Jean gazed at the little car and it levitated above the current, drifted part way up the hill, and set down gently on dry ground. The old woman scrambled out and looked wildly about, no doubt seeking the cause of her miraculous deliverance. Scott turned the Blazer around and headed back the way he'd come.

Periodically Jean asked him to stop, and they all climbed out into the miserable weather. While Scott and Logan peered about, looking for they knew not what, she scanned, with and without the mini-Cerebro. Scott was no expert on psionics—he suspected that you couldn't be if you weren't a telepath yourself—but he knew as much as any non-psi did, and theoretically, Jean should have been able to scan just as effectively in a moving vehicle as standing still, or under a roof as opposed to beneath the open sky. But if she presently

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felt otherwise, then that was the truth for her, and he'd do his best to accommodate her.

Not that it was helping so far. He fought against the urge to use his Global Comm-Stat Unit to phone the Professor in his hotel room in Japan, where he was scanning for Ororo and Rogue himself, and ask how he was faring. The interruption would only break his mentor's concentration. Either Charles or one of the two X-Men with him would unquestionably contact them immediately if he succeeded.

In the back seat, something rasped. Scott glanced over his shoulder. A thin brown cheroot in his mouth, Wolverine was scratching the head of a kitchen match with his thumbnail, but it wouldn't ignite. Grunting in irritation, he dropped it on the floor and tried another, with no better results.

A third match finally lit, but at the same moment Jean twisted in her seat. "Please," she said irritably, "not while we're cooped up in here and I'm trying to concentrate." Scott was a little surprised. Neither he nor she were smokers, but ordinarily Logan's secondhand smoke didn't bother her. A slight, virtually reflexive application of her psychokinesis served to keep it away.

In the rearview mirror, Cyclops saw Logan's face twist into a glower. "Fine," he growled. "Lord knows, it seems like you need all the help you can—" He sat up straight. "I hear a whole bunch of trucks. They'll be moving across that intersection in a second."

Sure enough, an olive-colored truck with a white star on the door rolled out of the cross street ahead. In the back rode twenty soldiers wearing helmets and raincoats, with M16 assault rifles and M60 light machine guns in their hands. Some stood with heads lowered, their shoulders hunched against the driving rain, but others were peering alertly about.

Seven more such vehicles followed the first. "The Army," said Scott as the end of the convoy rumbled by.

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"What was your first clue?" Logan replied. Cyclops struggled to contain an angry retort.

"I suppose they're here to help with the flood control," said Jean.

"You figure they're going to shoot the water with all that firepower?" the Canadian asked.

"They probably brought weapons to prevent looting," said Cyclops.

"Maybe, but there's something about them, an edginess . . . But I guess a kid in uniform could get edgy about going head to head with a natural disaster. Hell with it. Let's find 'Roro and Rogue.'"

Their next stop was beside a pharmacy. Once, a red-and-white-striped awning had hung above the door and display window, but the storm had stripped most of it away. Only tatters remained, snapping in the wind.

Jean made another fruitless scan. Scott wondered if the mini-Cerebro in her hand could possibly be defective also, even though it appeared to be working fine. Then Logan said, "One o'clock."

Scott turned. Its propulsion system droning softly, a dull gray, armored hovercraft, roughly the shape of a giant bathtub though broader at the stern than at the prow, was cruising over the city about two hundred feet above the ground. The flanged muzzle of some sort of heavy weapon, perhaps an energy projector, jutted from the nose.

The X-Men had been strafed by high-tech airships too many times to remain in the open. As one, they sought cover by pressing themselves against the wall of the pharmacy. Scott took hold of his glasses, ready to lift them up and fire if the need arose. But the hovercraft simply flew over them and continued on its way, fading into the downpour and the gloom.

"Look familiar?" Logan asked.

Scott nodded. Like his teammate, he made a point of keeping current on what the armed services of the world were

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flying—besides which, he recognized the stylized logo on the hovercraft's bow. "SAFE."

SAFE was an acronym for Strategic Action For Emergencies, a relatively new federal agency. Valerie Cooper, their primary source inside the Washington bureaucracy, had briefed them on the organization's agenda, and the X-Men had encountered a few of its operatives in Washington during the hearings for the Emergency Intervention Act. "SAFE wouldn't be involved in flood control," said Jean, brushing at a stray strand of her auburn mane, which, her hat notwithstanding, had gradually become almost as wet as the hair plastered to Scott's head. "Their job is to deal with paranormal threats to the nation."

"Which means the feds have turned out in force to hunt for some kind of super-villain," said Logan. "Whatever it is, it's got to be tied in to Rogue and Storm disappearing. So we need to find out what the government knows."

Scott nodded. "I agree." As a rule, the X-Men preferred to steer clear of the authorities, an understandable wariness considering that Washington, in the throes of one outbreak of antimutant hysteria or another, had sometimes declared them outlaws and attempted to hunt them down. But on other occasions, generally when in desperate need of the kind of help that only superhumans could provide, government officials had given them tolerance and even cooperation. And considering that SAFE was patrolling Natchez, it certainly looked as if they might welcome assistance now. "Let's find someone we can talk to."

Cyclops drove on, forcing himself, despite his impatience, to go slowly enough to cope with the poor visibility and slick pavement. After three more blocks, he saw red and blue lights flickering in the gray veils of rain ahead. "This looks promising," he said.

"Could be," Logan said, "assuming that the local boys know what the feds do."

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Scott didn't want the police to see the X-Men driving up in Laurel Smith's car. If their friend was ever linked to the team, it could well endanger her life. He pulled the vehicle over to the curb. The tires threw up a fan of filthy water from the gutter.

The mutants looked warily about. When he was sure no one was watching, Scott squirmed out of his trenchcoat, closed his eyes, removed his glasses, reached over his shoulder, and pulled up his blue mask. Attached to the cloth was his golden visor with its ruby quartz aperture. The device, another of Xavier's inventions, helped him to direct his optic blast with pinpoint accuracy, an invaluable advantage in combat. Thanks to the controls built into his gloves, he could even control the visor without touching it.

Wolverine rid himself of his hat and oilskin and pulled on his own cowl, a yellow mask with a pair of curved, black, pointed projections that swept up over his ears, making his head at least vaguely resemble that of his animal namesake. Jean merely willed it and, with a coruscation of sparks, her civilian clothing became a formfitting emerald outfit with shining golden accessories: boots that rose nearly to her hips, gloves that stretched halfway up her forearms, and a long sash knotted around her waist. A stylized golden bird gleamed on her chest, at the base of a V where the green fabric yielded to black.

The three X-Men climbed from the Blazer and headed up the street. In a few seconds, they were close enough to the flashing emergency lights to see what was going on. Three Natchez Police Department black-and-whites had stopped to sort out a five-vehicle pileup. Scott was pleased to observe that no ambulances or people with serious injuries were in view. The mutants could approach without fear of interrupting any critical, life-saving activities.

"Excuse me, officers," Cyclops called. "We're the X-Men, and we need to speak with you."

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Startled, all the people near the crumpled cars, the three policemen and seven civilians alike, jerked around to gape at them. Then the officers snatched for the pistols in their holsters. Some of the civilians stood frozen, while others screamed and spun around to flee.

One policeman, a thin, long-legged guy with dark sideburns, pointed his automatic—a Smith and Wesson Model 659 by the look of it—at Scott. Seeing that the cop was about to pull the trigger, the mutant fired a blaze of crimson power from his visor. The tightly focused beam bashed the gun from the officer's hand and spun him like a top, his shot firing harmlessly into the ground between them.

Another cop shot at Phoenix, but the bullets glanced harmlessly from the telekinetic shield she willed into being around herself. Suddenly the policeman flopped like a rag doll. His eyes rolled back, his knees buckled, and he fell, splashing up water. She'd tagged him with one of her "mental bolts," an aggressive application of her telepathy that could stun most people into helplessness.

The remaining officer fired at Wolverine from behind a bronze-colored Seville with a crumpled fender. Logan simply charged the gunman, zigzagging unpredictably, depending on his lightning reflexes, inhuman senses, combat skills, and, should all else fail, adamantium-reinforced skeleton and mutant healing factor to preserve him from serious harm. Unscathed by the hail of bullets, he sprang over the roof of the Cadillac and carried the policeman to the ground.

Scott heard the ratcheting clack of someone pumping a round into the chamber of a shotgun. Pivoting, he saw a heavysset man in a windbreaker and overalls, one of the civilians who hadn't run away, pointing the weapon at Wolverine. The guy must have grabbed it out of his car.

Cyclops fired his optic blast at the man but, to his own surprise, missed by a hair. The shotgun flashed and boomed.

Logan could almost certainly have simply tumbled clear of

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the blast, but then it would have hit the policeman he was crouching on top of. Maintaining his grip on the officer, he rolled with him, and when he surged to his feet, his hairy, muscular right arm was bleeding. He snarled, his gleaming, adamantium claws leaped from the steel sockets on the backs of his blue gauntlets, and he charged the man who'd hurt him.

As his fellow X-Men had gradually discovered, Logan was many men in one. An acerbic loner and a staunch friend. A dedicated adherent of the Japanese warrior code of honor called *bushido* and a pragmatic, ruthless covert operative with a rare aptitude for dirty tricks. A stoic philosopher and a brawling carouser. But behind all his other personae lurked one that scarcely seemed human at all. A savage beast which, when evoked by rage, would kill without hesitation.

The X-Men hadn't seen as much of the beast in recent years. Logan had gotten better at suppressing it. But Scott was certain it had just broken out of its cage and meant to butcher the man who'd shot it.

He fired an optic blast at Logan just as Jean cried, "No!" both aloud and inside his mind, a split second too late to deter him. His wide, low-power beam took the short man in the side and knocked him sprawling. Only then did he see that Wolverine didn't really have his claws out after all.

Logan scrambled up and now the blades, slightly curved and twelve inches long, did spring into view. Then the man with the shotgun worked the pump again. Wolverine whirled, leapt into the air, and took the guy down with a side thrust kick to the jaw.

The officer Cyclops had disarmed bent over, evidently snatching for a second gun strapped to his ankle. Scott slammed him unconscious with another blast.

Meanwhile, the cop Logan had knocked down was dazedly trying to point his automatic at the Canadian. Jean wrenched the gun from his hand with her telekinesis, then stunned him with a mental bolt.

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The X-Men surveyed the battlefield. The three cops and the civilian with the shotgun were down, and everyone else had run away. Cyclops shook his head in annoyance. There was no other way—the outcome was inevitable from the moment the first cop decided to shoot first and ask questions never, so to speak—but Scott Summers didn't like it when things got so out of control so quickly.

Logan glared at Scott. "What was the idea of zapping me?" he demanded.

"I'm sorry," Cyclops said, and he truly was, contrite and appalled that he could make such an error in combat. It was a mistake that in other circumstances could have gotten his teammate killed. "I could have sworn I saw your claws come out. Maybe it was light reflecting off the rain. I thought I only had an instant to stop you from cutting the man who shot you."

The bloody flesh of Logan's arm squirmed and twitched as it repaired itself. A pellet, forced from the wound it had made, fell to the pavement with a clink.

"Did you really think I'd go berserk in a nothing little scuffle like this?" the Canadian asked. "Against guys who didn't have a chance against us? You're losin' it, One-Eye."

"Maybe so," said Cyclops humbly. "At any rate—"

Wolverine pivoted toward Jean, cutting him off, and a pang of anger lanced through Scott's remorse. "The cops are all unconscious," Logan said. "Can you wake one of 'em up?"

"I think so," said Jean. "I tried to go easy on the last one, so we'd have someone to question."

"Then let's get to it," Logan said. "Odds are, one of the guys who ran away has already called 911."

The second officer Jean had felled was a middle-aged man with a sandy mustache and a small white scar on his chin. She knelt beside him, touched his cheek, and stared into his face, administering, Scott knew, the telepathic equivalent of smelling salts.

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The policeman's gray eyes fluttered open. He stared up blankly for a moment, then gave a violent start as he remembered what had happened and realized who was peering down at him.

"At ease, bub," said Wolverine. "If we wanted to hurt you, I wouldn't have pulled your butt out of the way of that shotgun blast, now would I? We just need some answers. You can start by explaining why you attacked us."

The policeman blinked in surprise. It was plain that whatever questions he might have expected, that wasn't one of them. "Well . . . you know," he stammered.

"Pretend that we don't," said Jean. "Please."

The cop shook his head in puzzlement. "If that's what you want. You X-Men are going to try to tear down the city, right? To convince people to stop discriminating against mutants or some such thing. SAFE and the Army are supposed to handle the situation, but of course we were on the lookout for you too, and when we saw you come out of the rain, we figured we had to defend ourselves."

"Back up," said Scott. "Why does anybody believe we intend to do such a thing?"

"Because your partner, that Rogue girl, announced it while she was murdering innocent people and ripping apart a fire station. Later on she attacked a supermarket full of shoppers buying supplies to help them ride out the storm."

"That can't be true!" said Jean, and Scott desperately wanted to agree with her. But it was obvious that the policeman believed what he was saying.

"Does anyone have any idea where Rogue is now?" Cyclops asked.

"Not as far as I know. After she trashes a place, she flies away and disappears."

"Has anyone sighted Storm—a woman who controls the weather?" Jean asked.

"If they did, they didn't pass the word along to me."

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"All right," said Scott. "We want you to deliver a message to your superiors. We don't know yet what's happening here in Natchez, but whatever it is, the X-Men are not responsible. We've come here to help you, and you can best help yourselves by leaving us alone to do our work. Do you understand?"

"Yeah," said the cop, "I get it."

"Good," said Cyclops. "We're leaving now. I want you to count to five hundred before getting up. Otherwise Phoenix will just have to knock you out again. Then you should have the man Wolverine kicked and the officer I hit with my optic blast examined by a doctor. I'm pretty sure they're all right, but it's best to be safe."

The X-Men turned and headed for the Blazer. For the first yards of their withdrawal, Scott had a crawling sensation between his shoulder blades, even though he was fairly sure the policeman was too cowed to initiate further hostilities, and knew that in any case Logan was bound to hear the man if he tried to pick up a weapon.

"Do you think he believed us?" asked Jean.

"Not a chance," said Wolverine, "and even if he did, his bosses won't. You know how they think. When in doubt, blame a mutant."

"I'm afraid you're right," said Scott. "We're going to have to be especially careful as we move around, to keep the authorities from spotting and attacking us." He grimaced. "As if this mission wasn't difficult enough already."

"Especially with *you* falling apart," Logan growled.

Scott's insides churned with mingled guilt and resentment. *Steady*, said Jean inside his mind. *Don't let him get to you.*

He has every right to be angry, her husband replied. *I'm supposed to know what I'm doing in combat. The mistake I made was inexcusable. But I can't help it, I still wish he'd drop the attitude.*

Don't feel bad about that. So do I.

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"You know," said Logan after a moment, "the heavy question ain't whether the cops and the GIs and the S.H.I.E.L.D. wanna-bes are still going to come gunning for us. Even if they do, that's just business as usual. What we've really got to figure out is whether it *is* Rogue running around slaughtering people, and if so, why?"

"It has to be an impostor," said Jean.

"That's what we all want to believe," said Scott. "But much as I hate to say it, it could be true. We've run into mind control before. Remember when Arcade brainwashed Colossus, and the Shadow King got his mental hooks into us? It's also possible that Rogue absorbed someone's essence and it overwhelmed her own personality. We saw that happen with the Juggernaut and Spiral."

"Wonder why the killer, whoever it is, would claim that the whole team has declared war on *Homo sapiens*," Wolverine said. "Just to make it harder for us to hunt for her? To blacken our names permanently? Or is she crazy enough that she actually believes it?"

"Either way," said Scott, "this is going to be a disaster for human-mutant relations if we can't straighten it out."

Jean grimaced. "I know you're right, and that it's important, but I can't care about it right now. All I can think about is Rogue. If she is responsible, imagine how she'll feel when she returns to normal and realizes what she's done. The guilt could destroy her. We *have* to find her quickly, for her own sake as well as that of her victims."

"Find her and Storm," Logan amended. "Where the blazes does Ororo fit into this mess?"

Wind rattled the window of the Dewdrop Inn and the neon beer logos hanging inside it. Surveying the dark, rain-swept world beyond the glass, Arnie Millsap drained the last of his drink, set his glass mug down on a table scarred with cigarette

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burns, then turned and waved to the bartender for another round.

Frank Jackson, his best friend—a wiry man with a receding hairline and narrow, almost copper-colored eyes—took a drag on his Camel and smiled. “I thought you had things to do,” he said in a teasing tone. “Like check on your trailer.”

“Trailer’s rented, and my stuff is all crap,” Arnie said bitterly, shifting his burly frame in his chair. The good Lord knew, he couldn’t afford to own anything nice, not with child support bleeding him dry and the furniture factory laying him off. “Who cares if it washes away?”

“How about checking on your kids?” asked Frank, emptying his own mug before the new ones arrived.

Arnie grimaced away a vague twinge of guilt. “Estelle wanted custody so bad, she can make sure they’re okay. Her and that boyfriend of hers.” He put on a high-pitched nasal whine in an effort to imitate his ex-wife’s voice. “‘Walter’s so considerate, so conscientious, so good with the boys.’ Great, then let Walter run his considerate, conscientious butt around in the rain.”

Frank nodded. “I don’t blame you a bit. You might as well stay warm and dry right where we are.” He nodded toward the television hanging behind the bar. “Especially with that monster flying around killing people. I thought this kind of garbage only happened in New York.”

Arnie twisted in his seat. On the TV screen, one of the local news anchors, a pretty blonde with big blue eyes and perfect hair was yakking about massacres at a fire station, a grocery, and a convalescent center. After a moment, her image gave way to that of an even hotter babe, a brunette with an I-dare-you smile and a white streak running through the center of her tousled curls. Or rather, Arnie reminded himself sternly, she’d be hot if she were truly a human being.

It was a still picture, no doubt culled from the TV station’s

files. Evidently no one had yet managed to take any footage of the mutant tearing innocent victims apart.

"Are you kidding?" said Arnie. "If I thought I'd run into her, I'd be out in the rain in a second."

Frank grinned. "Yeah, sure you would." The bartender set down new mugs and carried the empty ones away.

"Hey, I'm serious," Arnie said, stung by the other man's skepticism. "Serving the community's kind of a family tradition. My granddaddy and daddy were both in the Klan. I'm planning on joining Liberty's Torch or the Friends of Humanity myself."

"No offense intended," said Frank, puffing acrid blue smoke, "and if you want to follow in your father's footsteps, I say, more power to you. But you might want to let the government handle this Rogue. She sounds pretty tough."

"The government," Arnie sneered. "The government's in *collusion*—" he'd only recently learned that word, and felt a twinge of satisfaction at working it into the conversation "—with the mutants, just like it's in bed with all the other minorities. Otherwise they would have locked them all up by now. You ought to read some of the Liberty's Torch pamphlets I've got at home, or watch *Call to Arms* on cable access. Find out what's *really* going on this country."

"Uh huh."

"I mean it," Arnie said. "If all of us real Americans don't wake up soon, it's going to be too late to save what's left of our way of life."

He glimpsed a figure from the corner of his eye, and casually turned toward the window to see what idiot was roaming around on foot in the relentless downpour.

Across the street, a willowy young black woman with a mane of snow-white, sopping hair trudged along the sidewalk, shooting wary glances this way and that. She wore dark, shiny, skintight clothing: boots that rose halfway up her thighs, shorts, and a top that left her arms and midriff bare. After

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taking a final look around, she stepped into the doorway of a barber shop that afforded some small measure of shelter against the rain. There she hunkered down and rubbed her limbs as if to warm them.

Her strange appearance nagged at Arnie for a moment, and then he recognized her from a drawing in one of his brochures. A thrill of panic jangled along his nerves. He'd just been talking about fighting the mutants, and now he felt as if God, indulging a cruel sense of humor, were calling his bluff. "Jeez!" he exclaimed, jerking his head back around.

"What?" Frank asked.

"Across the street," said Arnie, reflexively lowering his voice. "Look, but for God's sake don't be obvious about it. We don't want to draw her attention."

Frank pivoted, and despite Arnie's warning, seemed to stare until his friend wanted to grab his head and yank it back around. "She does look weird," said the smaller man at last. "But so what?"

"So what?" said Arnie incredulously. "That's Storm, dummy! She's in the X-Men too!"

Frank's eyes widened. "Are you sure? I thought they all wore masks."

"What are you, an idiot? You were just looking at a picture of Rogue. Did she have on a mask? Check out the hair. When was the last time you saw a black chick with hair like that?"

The smaller man took another look. "I think you're right. You think we're in danger? Is she going to attack the neighborhood?"

"How would I know?" Arnie said. As surreptitiously as possible, he studied the mutant, and realized that she looked bedraggled, cold, and exhausted. Possibly even confused. Gradually his fear melted in a crescendo of excitement. "Hey, believe it or not, I think we're okay. I think she might be in trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" asked Frank.

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"I don't know, sick or hurt or something. But—" For a moment he felt giddy, and drew a deep breath to steady himself. "But I think we could get her."

"You mean, like, kill her?"

"You bet I do."

"What about the law?"

"The X-Men came to Natchez to kill us, didn't they? It's self-defense. The law won't be able to touch us. Heck, we'll be heroes. The guys who stopped the flood."

Frank blinked in puzzlement. "Come again?"

"Where do you think this funny weather came from?" asked Arnie, marveling at the depth of his own understanding. He'd never experienced such a rush of insights and brilliant ideas before. "She made it. That's what she does, and I'll bet that if we kill her, the rain will stop." And *then*, by God, they'd just see who Estelle thought was more wonderful, some mealy-mouthed little wuss of an electronics salesman or himself, just as they'd see if there weren't some businesses around town, hungry for the good publicity of having a hero on the payroll, eager to offer him a nice, soft, high-paying job after all.

"Wow," said Frank. For a second he looked lost in his own visions of glory, but then doubt crept into his expression. "But look, it still sounds—"

"What it sounds like is our patriotic duty. C'mon, you *know* what I'm saying is true."

Frank swallowed. "I guess. I know I don't want monsters running around town murdering people, anyway. It's just . . . are you sure we can handle this? She may look sick right now, but still, she's got super-powers, doesn't she? That's what makes her a mutant."

Arnie hesitated. "Okay, you've got a point. It might take more than just the two of us. But hey, that's why we've got friends." Beyond the window, Storm rose and started on up the street. "No more time to talk. Are you with me or not?"

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Frank swallowed, then gave him a jerky nod. "Yeah, I'm in."

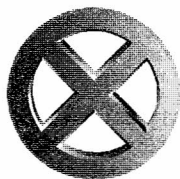
Arnie slapped him on the shoulder. "I knew I could count on you. You got that cell phone of yours?"

"Sure."

"Then give it to me." Frank pulled the device from the pocket of his denim jacket and handed it over. "You use the phone here to get some men together. I'll follow her and call you every few minutes to let you know where she is. When we're ready, we'll all move in on her."

Frank cocked his head. "You're willing to do that? Tail her all by yourself?"

For a second, remembering all the tales of mutant atrocities he'd heard, Arnie wasn't sure that he was. But he was feeling a lot of things that, much as he might pretend otherwise for the benefit of his buddies, he hadn't really felt in a long while, not since the furniture factory laid him off and Estelle kicked him out of the house. Important. Bold. Decisive. Lucky. And he had no intention of letting those feelings slip away. "I've been hunting ducks and deer all my life," he said. "She won't spot me. And if she does, I've got my .357 in the car. I'll be all right. You just take care of your end." He pulled on his John Deere cap and headed for the door.



CHAPTER 7



As the *Midnight Runner*, Excalibur's transonic transport, hurtled across the benighted face of North America, Amanda marveled at Dracula's timing. According to Kitty, who was piloting the craft, they should reach Natchez, their destination, just after sunset. That would allow the vampire to move about freely immediately, and also for the maximum possible time. Which to Amanda's mind suggested that he'd been able to calculate precisely how long they were all going to stand around palavering on Muir Island before embarking on their journey. She didn't like what that implied about his ability to predict and manipulate his new allies' behavior.

At the moment the lord of the undead sat inert in the very rear of the dimly lit cabin, away from any windows, completely covered by his cloak like a corpse wrapped in its shroud. Crossing the Arctic, the *Runner* had flown high enough to catch some sunlight, and he'd taken precautions to make absolutely sure he wasn't burned. As far as Amanda was concerned, he was welcome to stay hidden away forever.

Kurt sat in the copilot's seat, the light of the instruments staining his dark features a sickly green, a headset clasping his long, angular skull. "X-Men, this is Nightcrawler, aboard the *Midnight Runner*," he said. Since he and his comrades were heading for the U.S., he had—despite, Amanda believed, considerable trepidation about bringing Storm and Dracula together—decided to ask the senior team for assistance. "Come in, please." He waited for an answer that didn't come. "Blast it."

"Even if nobody's in the mansion," said Shadowcat, frowning, "the communications system should relay the call."

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"Unless they're off-planet, underground, or somewhere else equally inconvenient," Kurt replied. "In any case, it seems that we're on our own."

Amanda had rarely seen him look so somber heading into a mission, even when the stakes were high. Though a shrewd tactician who never endangered his teammates needlessly, Nightcrawler ordinarily approached any challenge as an opportunity for a glorious adventure, to joke and flaunt his abilities like Errol Flynn's Robin Hood or one of the other cinematic swashbucklers he so adored. It was one of the qualities that made him an effective leader. When, fighting some desperate battle, she glanced around to see him grinning and clearly having the time of his life, she always felt that somehow, everything was going to come out all right.

His panache under pressure was one aspect of a generally blithe and forthright disposition. During their years together, he'd confided in her to an extent that, she believed, most other women could only envy. Indeed, he was sometimes more open than she was; she had a moody, secretive streak, which, though it seldom came to the surface, had occasionally produced problems in their relationship.

Yet for all his candor, her lover had never said a great deal about Belasco, and even less about that other Kurt Wagner who'd become the sorcerer's vicious toady. She suspected that on some level, he'd always been at least a little afraid that he might be capable of the same transformation, and that anxiety was responsible for his current glumness. She wished that Dracula had refrained from evoking the possibility.

Clad in his red and yellow sleeveless uniform, his steel face and arms gleaming, Piotr sat at the electronic countermeasures station with its semicircle of illuminated consoles. Amanda suspected that he wouldn't turn his body back to weak, vulnerable flesh until the mission was over. With his uncharacteristic scowl and the grim set of his square jaw, the hulking Russian looked as dour as Kurt. But in his case Amanda

sensed that it had less to do with Dracula's mockery, much as it had stung him at the time. At present Piotr was too full of hate for Belasco to dwell on anything else.

"May I join you?" asked a deep, soft, lightly accented voice.

Her heart jolting, Amanda lurched around, to see that Dracula had silently crept up beside her. His white face was even more spectral than usual in the wan illumination. Strangely, neither Kurt, Kitty, nor even Colossus, who was seated almost directly across from her, appeared to notice. For all they cared, the vampire might still have been resting veiled and motionless in the back of the plane.

Dracula waved his hand at the others. "A minor trick of mesmerism," he said dismissively. "They'd react to me if I did anything threatening, and will notice me soon in any case. Or you can rouse them now if you prefer, simply by calling to them. But I've been waiting for an opportunity to talk to you in private, and on the island you said you needed to confront your fear. I assume that meant face-to-face, without a line of your comrades interposing themselves between us."

Wishing that her pulse would stop racing, Amanda scowled at him. "I suppose you're right. So let's talk. I was just thinking that you're petty and mean, even when it's counterproductive to be so."

Dracula smiled and sat down in the plush seat opposite her, casually spreading his cloak to facilitate the action. "Now you're borrowing a leaf from little Kitty's book," he observed, "insulting me to convince yourself that I don't truly frighten you so terribly much after all. I'd hoped for better from you, considering that you and I are different than these other fools. Fellow denizens of the boundless universe of miracle and shadow that exists beyond their narrow country of order and light."

"I'm nothing like you," Amanda replied. "And you really were spiteful past the point of stupidity when you taunted Kurt

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and Piotr. Why would you want to alienate or demoralize them when you need them to fight on your side?"

Dracula shrugged. "I know them as well as you do, my dear, as well if not better than they know themselves. I was certain it would take more than a bit of badinage to deter them from marching off to fight for goodness, humanity, and all those other hollow abstractions they find so captivating after I brandished Belasco in their faces." The *Midnight Runner* bounced as it encountered turbulent air, no doubt a byproduct of the storm currently inundating the city ahead. "So why shouldn't I vent my spleen? Your lover and his associates have caused me no little inconvenience in their time. And even if they hadn't, I'm tired of listening to idiots prattle about the coming war between *Homo sapiens* and *Homo superior*. It's time someone taught mutants that they are neither the genuine master race nor the predestined inheritors of the Earth. That distinction belongs to my kind."

"In other words, you're vain as well as spiteful."

The vampire's eyes gleamed a baleful red. "I believe the word you intended was proud, and pride is a virtue in a prince. Now, have you indulged your own malice sufficiently to move on to topics of greater moment than your sophomoric appraisal of my character?"

"I suppose so," Amanda said, "since I would like to ask you a question. Why did you want me on this mission? You said you wanted the Excalibur members you'd met before, who had also already fought Belasco. I don't fall in either category."

"No," Dracula said, "but my enemy deals in magic, and so do you. I only wish you were better at it."

"I guess that now I'm supposed to listen to your sophomoric appraisal of me."

Dracula smiled. "It is said that turnabout is fair play. But have no fear. I'm certain I have little to tell you that you haven't already comprehended for yourself. You've encoun-

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tered truly proficient sorcerers in your time. You must know what a paltry little hedge witch you are in comparison."

"I'm satisfied being what I am." It was *almost* the truth, though she suspected that no one ever mastered any significant portion of the art without coveting, at least a little, the secrets that still lay beyond her grasp. "I've seen where pursuing ultimate power can lead." It had nearly destroyed her mother, the Gypsy sorceress called Margali of the Winding Way, and on more than one occasion.

"In other words, you're craven," Dracula said. Pivoting in his swivel chair, Piotr turned away from his boards of instruments for a moment. His uncanny eyes, metallic as the rest of his body, gazed blankly across the cabin, passing over Dracula without registering him.

"That isn't true," Amanda said.

"You just now acknowledged it yourself," Dracula said. "Fearful of the risks involved, you've shrunk from the possibility of fully mastering your birthright. You wasted years drudging away as a menial airline stewardess and consorting with these wretched mutants, years you might have devoted to your calling. And the upshot is that I find you pathetically unprepared for the task before you. Were you otherwise, I could never have possessed you. In any duel of wizardry, Belasco would swat you like a fly."

"You don't know me," she protested, although it was plain that at least to some extent, he did. "I've won my share of fights."

"Don't be absurd. With the X-Men and Excalibur to prop you up, you've survived brawls with ruffians possessing a freakish talent or two. That hardly qualifies you to challenge a master sorcerer." Beyond the windows, lightning flickered in the masses of black clouds. "I'll wager you haven't even sensed that Belasco conjured the storm we're flying into."

Amanda blinked in dismay. If Belasco could command the

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weather to such an extent, then his powers really did dwarf her own. "I . . . no," she admitted.

"And what is the most reliable of your meager armamentarium of spells?" the vampire said. "Blinking instantly from place to place, a trick you no doubt learned in mawkish imitation of your lover. An effect of virtually no use in battle, save to flee the field. Sadly, the task before us demands a lioness, not a rabbit."

The *Runner* bucked. "Anybody who's not strapped in, you might want to," said Kitty, without looking around from the multicolored holographic heads-up display currently glowing above her instruments. "This air is only going to get rougher."

Amanda struggled to suppress the anxiety and self-doubt that Dracula had stirred in her. *Consider the source*, she told herself. "You're doing the same stupid thing to me that you did to the others," she said. "Trying to scare me when, if you had any sense, you'd want me to be confident."

"Confidence is useful only when warranted," the vampire replied. "I've been rubbing your nose in your inadequacies in order to motivate you to transcend them, and thus improve our chances against our foe."

Amanda cocked her head. "It's a little late for that, isn't it?"

"Ordinarily, it would be," Dracula said. "But happily, I am no ordinary ally." He reached inside his inky garments and produced an oval golden pendant with a black piece of onyx in the center. For a moment the amulet seemed to glitter more brightly than was natural in the dim lighting. Amanda felt some potent mystical force flowing through the metal and the gem.

The vampire extended it in his long-nailed, pallid hand. "Take it," he said.

She wanted to do precisely that. The power locked in the

pendant called to the magic inside herself. But she resisted the impulse. "What is it?" she asked.

"Something old and precious. Legend has it that the alchemist Paracelsus created a sort of simulacrum of his own mind inside it. I can't vouch for that—you won't suddenly find yourself in communication with another personality when you hang it around your neck—but I can attest that it augments a mage's innate abilities. In particular, it facilitates the acquisition of arcane lore. Under normal circumstances, it might take you hours of study to learn a new spell. The pendant will compress that time radically. And I propose to instruct you in some glammers and conjurations potent enough to give even Belasco pause."

"Why would you share such power, knowing that you and I are likely to wind up on opposite sides someday? You can throw the spells on Belasco yourself, can't you?"

"Alas, no. Certain forms of magic are reserved for the living. I've memorized the operations in question, but I can't cast them." His eyes shone like rubies. "We've sworn to deal with one another as true comrades, Miss Sefton. Trust me and take the gift I offer you. Strengthen yourself so that you can aid in the desperate struggle that lies ahead. Or will you let fear rule you yet again?"

Surely, Amanda thought, if he meant to play her false, if some curse were lurking inside the amulet like a serpent coiled to strike, she'd perceive it before it could hurt her. She was that competent a sorceress, anyway. She reached out and took it in her red-gloved hand.

The contact intensified her awareness of the pendant's magical nature, but there was nothing alarming about it. She lowered it over her head, pulling her wavy, honey-blonde hair clear of the chain.

As the amulet settled on her chest, she felt a subtle shift in the quality of her own thoughts, like the moment when a headache stopped throbbing, or a glass of wine began to influence

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her mood. In this instance, she couldn't define precisely what was different, but knew beyond question that something was.

"Are you well?" Dracula asked.

"I guess so," she replied. "What's next?"

"That's a good question," Dracula said, smiling. "I have so much to teach you. How to manipulate the flow of time as easily as you could invert an hourglass. How to whistle fire and magma from the core of the earth. How to transform your enemies into creeping vermin. But perhaps we should begin with a divination that might enable you to lead us directly to Belasco."

"All right," said Amanda, reminding herself again that she couldn't trust Dracula. That she had to proceed cautiously. Yet despite her lingering suspicions, she couldn't help feeling eager to acquire potent new magical secrets, arcana to crush the enemy that Kurt, Piotr, and Kitty manifestly regarded with such wariness.

"Open your mind," Dracula said. "I'm going to show you a pentagram. The divination requires that you memorize it, then visualize it as you recite the incantation."

"I understand," the sorceress said. Breathing slowly and deeply, she effortlessly placed herself in a state of meditation.

After a moment, a scarlet and amber geometric design shimmered into existence before her inner eye, as clearly visible as the black-clad figure seated across from her. It gave the illusion of depth, as if she were gazing down a shaft with luminous beams and cables extending across it. Unlike many magical figures, the pentagram didn't incorporate any writing, no names of gods or angels or the like, or recognizable mystical symbols, either. It was simply an intricate mesh of curves and angles with something disturbing about it. She had to quash a sudden pang of loathing, an instinctive urge to thrust it out of her head.

She suspected that her distaste indicated that the pentagram was associated with the baser forces of the metaphysical realm,

earthbound elementals or something even lower, but the insight failed to deter her. Except for sorcerers who restricted themselves to the most rarefied forms of white magic, striving solely for communion with the Divine, every practitioner of the Art sometimes turned to such entities to accomplish his will. She concentrated on the figure with all her might.

Though Dracula might consider her a dilettante, she'd been honing the mental faculties essential to a mage since her initiation into the Art at her mother's knee. Still, it would normally have taken her a long while to commit the complex design glimmering in her mind to memory, especially since the contemplation of it made her queasy. But thanks to the pendant, it only required half a minute.

"Got it," she said. The image vanished as Dracula stopped projecting it into her consciousness. She summoned it once more, this time from the depths of her own mind.

"The rest is easy," the vampire said. "A simple invocation. I'll recite it, and you say it after me."

"All right."

"I have flown to the end of the endless night."

"I have flown to the end of the endless night."

"I have sailed the seas that have never known the sun."

"I have sailed the seas that have never known the sun."

The cabin seemed to darken, to fade, while the red and yellow figure brightened.

"I have plumbed the abyss at the heart of the world," Dracula said.

"I have plumbed the abyss at the heart of the world," she repeated. Now the external universe was nearly gone. She was only aware of the pentagram and the vampire's murmuring voice.

"I am a child of the dark, an initiate of the dark, and I call on my kindred in darkness to grant me aid. Erebus and Nox, attend me. Hecate, Lady of the Crossroads, take my hand."

Amanda repeated what he'd said. Around the borders of

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the pentagram, something squirmed, amorphous shapes like those that appeared when a person closed his eyes and pressed on the lids.

"Show me what lurks hidden in the dark," the vampire continued. "Part the veil and reveal the face of my enemy."

"Show me what lurks hidden in the dark," the sorceress said. "Part the veil and reveal the face of my enemy."

The writhing around the magical design became more energetic. More eager. At the same time, a pinpoint of pure blackness appeared in the heart of the figure. Paradoxically, she sensed that its extreme darkness was as conducive to vision as light. If she didn't botch the remainder of the spell, it would iris open, and—with luck—she'd see Belasco inside it.

"Demons of Denak," said Dracula, "unbar the gates of perception. Thog! Shuma-Gorath! Satannish! Lend me your strength."

Amanda was so captivated by the mote of blackness at the core of the pentagram, so intent on recapitulating the proper cadence and inflection of the incantation, that she automatically began to repeat the vampire's words once more. "Demons of Denak, unbar the gates of perception." The pinpoint of darkness started to expand. "Th—" Then, with a jolt of horror, she realized that she was about to invoke three powerful and malevolent demon lords, and their names caught in her throat.

With the proper technique and attitude, a sorceress could command petty devils without imperiling her soul, or so Amanda's mother had taught her. But no one could call on beings as mighty and foul as Thog and Satannish without paying a price for their assistance. That price would be to welcome a measure of their corruption inside herself and stain her spirit for all time.

She tried to stop visualizing the pentagram, but it refused to disappear. Instead it burned brighter than ever, while the

shadowy shapes shifting about it resolved into gaunt, scaly creatures with talons, long simian arms, and lashing tails.

The pentagram seemed to lunge at her, stamping itself into her essence, searing her like a branding iron. Gibbering and cackling, the spirits ran riot through the corridors and chambers of her mind, clawing at everything they found there. Simply by commencing the spell, she'd opened herself to evil, and it had no intention of allowing her to escape from it unscathed.

She fought madly to thrust the maleficence outside herself, to hammer it back into the netherworld from which it had come. "Vishanti!" she cried, prompted solely by her instincts or conceivably her terror. The trinity of enigmatic entities collectively called the Vishanti were said to hold themselves aloof from all but the greatest of white magicians. She had certainly never sealed a pact with them, nor established any other sort of claim on their assistance.

Yet even so, perhaps this once they condescended to help her. Suddenly the pentagram and the chittering goblins were gone. She could see the interior of the *Midnight Runner* again.

She felt as if it had taken her at least a minute to break free of the magic, but it was obvious that in reality, only a moment had elapsed. Dracula was staring at her, his pallid, aquiline face for once betraying surprise. Alarmed by her cry, Kurt and Piotr were scrambling from their seats. Since she was flying the plane, Shadowcat resisted the impulse to do likewise, but she was peering backward, her hazel eyes wide with concern.

"What's wrong?" Kurt asked. The jet bounced in the turbulent air, but thanks to the clinging power of his long, two-toed feet in their white, bifurcated boots, the mutant kept his balance without difficulty. Colossus, however, staggered.

Perhaps fearing that his new allies meant to attack him, Dracula flowed from his seat and stood in the aisle, as unaffected by the *Runner*'s shaking as Kurt. "I too would like to

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know what went awry," he said. "The spell was working properly. I could sense it."

"What spell?" Nightcrawler asked.

"Dracula said he could teach me some new magic," Amanda said, feeling obscurely ashamed, "magic that would make me more useful against Belasco."

Piotr's eyes narrowed. His broad, handsome, gleaming face now looked less alarmed than simply intent.

"Of course, I want to be useful," Amanda continued, "so I agreed. But halfway through the first spell we tried, a divination to try to find out where Belasco is hiding, I realized that the incantation was *black* magic. If I'd gone on to the end, it would have wounded my soul, so I had to stop. The problem was that it can be dangerous to break off a conjuration in the middle, and I had some trouble before I managed to shut the magic down. That's when you heard me cry out."

Kurt rounded on Dracula. "You hypnotized us."

"Not deeply, and not all of you. The sorceress acted of her own free will."

"You gave me your word that you'd behave as our true comrade," gritted Kurt.

"Which is precisely what I was doing," the vampire replied. "I was furnishing Miss Sefton with the tools she so desperately needs to do her job."

"At the price of her soul?" Nightcrawler demanded. "Where did you find this new magic, the *Darkhold*?" During the X-Men's second clash with Dracula, he'd learned that the lore in that particular grimoire notoriously warped the spirit of anyone who tried to use it.

"Among other places," Dracula said blandly. "But really, Wagner. 'At the price of her soul,' indeed. Rein in your penchant for melodrama so we can resolve this matter like rational people. Or better still, you mutants, who have no concept of the issues involved, could be quiet and let Miss Sefton and I resolve it. But I suspect that's asking too much."

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"Yeah," said Kitty from the cockpit, "I'm pretty sure it is." Outside the windows, lightning flared. Raindrops beaded the glass.

"Very well," said Dracula, sneering in her direction, "let us all deliberate together. Any weapon, any means of imposing one's will upon the world, carries the potential to callous and blemish the soul. How many adversaries have you beaten unconscious with the martial arts your senseis Wolverine and Ogun taught you, Pryde? How many men's bones have you shattered with those steel fists of yours, Rasputin? How many foes have you bloodied with your saber, Wagner? Do you believe that your experiences haven't changed you? Hardened you? Perhaps even inculcated a secret taste for seeing an enemy lying humbled and helpless at your feet? I trust that even you are not so naïve."

"We're not like you," Nightcrawler said. "We can take satisfaction in our skills and successes, yet still regret the necessity of hurting others."

"You have a rare talent for rationalization," Dracula retorted.

"Perhaps, over time, the violence does affect us," Amanda said. "But that's not the same as deliberately opening up your spirit and inviting the forces of darkness inside."

"Precisely what did you imagine was going to happen to you?" the vampire asked scornfully. "Did you think you'd wake from your trance a ravening beast, a stranger to yourself and those who love you? Did you fear that a chasm to Hell would open beneath your feet and swallow you? You would merely have emerged from the experience with one more spot on that oh-so-precious soul of yours, a stain nearly indistinguishable from all the others you've acquired merely by living and sinning as every mortal inevitably sins. A miniscule price to pay, given the potential benefit. Any genuine warrior would bear the scar gladly, and if you feel differently, especially

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considering what's at stake, then you truly are a coward after all."

"That's enough from you," said Kurt. "And if—"

"Hold on," Piotr said. The others turned in his direction, which seemed to fluster him a little. "I certainly don't know much about magic. But if Dracula really can help Amanda to locate Belasco, and teach her spells that will help us destroy him . . ."

"Petey!" Shadowcat exclaimed.

Colossus scowled. "Illyana learned a lot of her magic from Belasco himself. There couldn't be a source more tainted than that. But afterwards, she used sorcery again and again without it turning her evil."

"But she always had to guard against the possibility," said Kitty gently, "and there were times when she did come horribly close to losing her soul. You remember that as well as I do. It's part of the reason you hate Belasco so much."

"True," the Russian said. "But in the end, Illyana saved herself, and if she, a half-grown child, could manage that, then couldn't Amanda cast *Darkhold* spells just once or twice, on this one mission, and still come out of it all right?"

Dracula inclined his head. "My compliments, farmer. I never expected such intelligent thinking from you." He smiled sardonically. "The need for vengeance clarifies the mind wonderfully, does it not?"

Ignoring the vampire, Kurt gazed steadily up into Piotr's eyes. "Listen to me, *mein freund*. I dislike pulling rank on you, but I'm going to do so now. No member of Excalibur is going to endanger his or her immortal soul, if only because we don't need to run that risk. We can defeat Belasco by other means."

"And what means would those be?" Dracula asked, sneering. "Praying to your Savior?"

"Perhaps," Kurt replied. "That method among others."

"Despite the fact that, deep down, you question whether

He ever even existed," mused Dracula as though astonished at the blue-furred mutant's idiocy. "Even if He did, isn't it plain from the chaos and misery you see all around you that He withdrew from the physical plane a long, long time ago? I would rather petition forces and intelligences that remain engaged with humanity, and judging from the path she has chosen to walk, Miss Sefton shares my preference." He turned toward her. "Sorceress, you're not this obstreperous lout's chattel, whatever he believes, particularly in matters involving the Art, and thus his bluster is entirely beside the point. It is for *you* to decide whether, in these dire straits, to accept my gift or not."

She imagined herself failing, letting Kurt down, Excalibur down, the world down, just when they needed her most, and for a moment, she hesitated. Then she lifted the amulet off and held it out to Dracula. "You mentioned my path," she said. "Well, it's never been the Left-Hand Path, or even the Winding Way of gray magic my mother follows. Like Kurt said, I'll just have to muddle along without the extra power that this would bring."

Kitty cried, "Way to go, Amanda!" Kurt smiled in satisfaction. Piotr's somber expression was harder to interpret. Amanda didn't think he was truly angry at her. Perhaps he was even a bit ashamed of himself for suggesting what he had. Yet it was obvious that a part of him was dissatisfied with this resolution, at seeing a chance to strike at Belasco slipping through his fingers.

Dracula took the onyx pendant and tucked it away inside his garments. "So be it," he said. "Perhaps in time you will repent of your cowardice and selfishness. I hope that by then it will not already be too late."

"This subject is closed," Nightcrawler said. "You're not to bring it up again, or hypnotize any of us, either. Instead, let's talk about what we *are* going to do when we get on the

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ground. You must have some other thoughts on how to find Belasco."

"In point of fact," said Dracula, "I do. I know my rebellious progeny. I know their lairs, favorite hunting grounds, and habits. It should be relatively easy to locate one of them, whereupon we can either follow him to his new master's hiding place or capture and interrogate him."

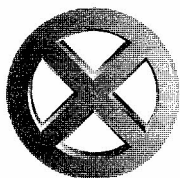
"A reasonable plan," said a new voice, male, seasoned with a hint of one of the Romance languages, from the back of the plane.

Startled, Amanda jerked around. Her companions did the same. Before them, his figure slightly translucent, stood a man dressed in a scarlet cloak and tunic, with a heavy, golden-hilted sword hanging from his belt. His skin was nearly as ruddy as his garments, horns sprouted from his brow, and a tail shaped similarly to Kurt's dangled behind him. But the most alarming things about him were the cruel mockery of his smile, the ruthless intelligence of his obsidian gaze, and, visible to any other sorcerer, the blaze of demonic magic that surrounded him like the corona of some black sun.

"Belasco!" Piotr breathed.

"I trust this resolves any lingering doubts as to my veracity," Dracula said dryly.

"Reasonable, but futile," the magician continued. "I'm afraid you won't find any of the vampires of Natchez infesting their usual haunts, Your Grace. They're all with me, awaiting the death and resurrection of the world."



CHAPTER 8



Peering at the sky, her eyes narrowed against the cold rain that lashed her upturned face, Jean Grey watched another hovercraft pass over her head. Judging by the frequency with which she was spotting them, she suspected that SAFE had at least a dozen of the flying gun platforms in the air. In the gloom produced by the storm, visibility was so poor that she wouldn't have been surprised if the agents on board had decided to sweep the ground with searchlights. But no doubt they had more sophisticated surveillance systems—infrared, sonar, and the like—for penetrating the murk. But since they had yet to descend on Scott, Logan, and herself, they must not have any mutant-detecting gadgets analogous to Cerebro.

Or else, she thought glumly, they had one, but at the moment, it wasn't working any more effectively than the X-Men's own technology. Now seated in the back of the Blazer, Scott was trying to rectify that. An array of tiny tools—screwdrivers, tweezers, a can of compressed air, a circuit tester, and a soldering iron among them—laid out on the seat beside him, he'd opened the black case of the mini-Cerebro and was fiddling with the works inside.

Like Jean, Logan had climbed out into the rain, perhaps to study their surroundings in the forlorn hope of gaining some clue as to Rogue and Ororo's whereabouts, or maybe just to smoke and stretch his legs. At need, he could muster the patience of a tiger lurking in a blind, waiting motionless for its next meal to come down the trail, but it was likewise true that he hated being cooped up in close quarters for long. Despite the miserable weather, he would almost certainly have preferred to comb Natchez on foot, or astride his motorcycle.

The shoulder cape of his oilskin duster flapping in the wind,

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Wolverine abruptly pivoted toward Scott's partially open window. "Well?" he demanded.

"As far as I can tell," said Cyclops, brushing a strand of his wet brown hair off his forehead, "there's nothing wrong with it."

"So much for your hunches," said the shorter man. "Let's go, and you hold down the back seat for a while. I'm sick of you drivin' like an old lady."

Through their psychic link, she felt Scott's surge of annoyance. Suppressing it, he said, "Not yet. I can't work with parts this small if the car's in motion."

"You just said there's no problem to work on."

"I said that I haven't found anything specific. That doesn't mean the unit's operating at peak efficiency. Let me clean these contacts up, and make sure everything's screwed down nice and tight."

"Great," Logan said. "Ororo and Rogue could be dyin' right this second, but no sweat. You have fun tinkerin'." He wheeled, stalked away across the empty supermarket parking lot, and halted under a lamppost.

Watching him withdraw to sulk, Jean experienced a startling pang of dislike. She felt much as she had during the Canadian's early days with the team, when she'd not only considered him gratuitously nasty but sometimes feared that he was a bona fide psychopath. Frowning, she reminded herself that she didn't *really* feel that way, not anymore, not for a long time now, and walked over to stand beside him.

A jagged fork of lightning flared, and thunder boomed an instant later. The bolt must have struck somewhere nearby. "Every time that happens, I look up hoping to see Storm," she said.

Logan grunted.

"You know," she continued, "it's possible that Scott can get the mini-Cerebro working better, and if so, it's worth in-

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vesting the time. You said it yourself. Today my psi seems to need all the help it can get."

Logan turned to face her. The rain had glued his bushy side whiskers to his face. "I'm tired and I'm frustrated," he said. "Turns out that animal senses and spook training don't help much when you're hunting for somebody who just vanished out of the sky."

Jean lifted an eyebrow. "Was that supposed to be an apology?"

Exhaling a plume of pungent smoke, Wolverine shrugged. "More or less."

"In that case you should say it to Scott. You've been riding him a lot harder than you have me."

"On the up side, at least I didn't shoot him."

"That was an accident."

Logan snorted. "He was aimin' at me. He meant to knock me flyin'. That ain't an accident by my definition."

"He thought he was saving you from yourself."

"Which means he doesn't even trust me to keep my head in a penny-ante tussle with a couple cops and a civilian. Great, now I feel like he's a real pal."

"Fine!" she snapped, her patience abruptly exhausted. "If you want to hold a grudge, go for it, and why don't you go to hell while you're at it!"

She could see that she'd startled him. His dark eyes narrowed in concern. "Hey, Jeannie . . ."

"What's wrong?" she said. "Aren't I supposed to lose my temper? When you're surly or fly into a rage, everyone makes allowances. They say, oh, well, that's Wolverine, that's just the way he is. When Scott gets all brusque and morose, or Ororo has an attack of claustrophobia, or Bobby's moping around feeling insecure, it's the same thing. But no matter what happens, you all expect me to be sweet and calm. A voice of reason. Well, guess what? I never volunteered to be the surrogate mother of the X-Men, and I'm sick of feeling

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that I'll be letting the rest of you down if I don't behave as if that's what I am!"

Jean! said Scott, mind to mind. She could tell that he hadn't heard a word she'd said, but he had sensed her surge of bitter resentment across their psychic link. *What's wrong? If Logan's harassing you—*

The loving, worried touch of his essence took the edge off her anger, leaving her feeling dismayed and ashamed of her outburst. *It's all right*, she answered quickly. *Just keep working. Please.*

After a moment's hesitation, he said, *Okay. Whatever you say.*

Phoenix turned her attention outward again, toward Logan. "My turn to apologize," she said. "I don't know where that came from. It isn't how I truly feel, not most of the time, anyway."

Logan smiled. "Don't be sorry. You've got a point. The other X-Men do sort of count on you, Chuck, an' Scott to be perfect. Though in Scott's case we're talking about a drill-sergeant pain-in-the-butt kind of perfect. Guess it's because the Prof's a genius and the founding father, Cyke was the very first guy to sign on with him, and you, well, hell, Jean, you're you. You are pretty close to perfect far as I'm concerned. Still, I can see how it would get old to have everybody leanin' on you all the time. I don't mean to make your life any tougher."

"I know that," she sighed. "Let's just all try to get through the rest of this mission without driving each other crazy, all right?"

"Sounds like a plan to me." He shot her a wicked grin. "Maybe we should head back to the car before your old man starts worryin' that I'm making time with you."

By the time they reached the Blazer, Cyclops was just finishing screwing the mini-Cerebro's case back together. "Would you like to try it now?" he asked.

"Sure," she said, whereupon he climbed from the car and

handed her the instrument. She thumbed on the power switch and the miniature display lit up with a flicker of green. As a telepath, she seldom had occasion to refer to it. The device would feed data directly into her mind.

She'd never actually liked scanning with her psyche linked to a machine. It took a process which, for her, was as natural as breathing and turned it into something cumbersome and artificial. But there was no denying that a Cerebro, whether the master system back in the mansion or one of the portable models, could on occasion enhance both the range and the accuracy of her innate abilities.

She melded her mind with the program running inside the plastic and metal box. The rich psychic landscape perceptible to her telepathy became simple and abstract, as if she'd exchanged the complex images of normal sight for blips on a radar screen. The mental signatures of all nonmutants dropped from her awareness instantly, while Scott and Logan burned as brightly as the lightning flaring overhead.

"I think the machine may be working better," she said. "I'll see what I can do with it." Scott and Logan watched her intently. Praying that she wouldn't let them down, she pushed her awareness outward, through Natchez and the surrounding area.

For the first minute, nothing happened, and once again, as she had on several occasions since the start of the mission, she wondered if she couldn't find Rogue and Ororo because they were dead. She sternly told herself that it couldn't be so, then scanned even harder, pushing her power to the limit.

Soon she was sweating. Her muscles twitched, and her head throbbed. Loath though she was to admit yet another failure, she knew she mustn't overextend herself, lest she render her telepathy useless for the duration. She started to relax, to uncouple her mind from the mini-Cerebro, then sensed another mutant presence.

When she tried to zero in on it, the mindscape seemed to

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disintegrate in a blaze of mental static. She stabbed at the interference with the force of her will, driving her awareness through it like a dagger. On the other side of the barrier, dim and wavering in the psychic murk but unmistakable nonetheless, she discerned a familiar mind, albeit with some troubling alterations to its basic structure. The mini-Cerebro compared the mutant's energy pattern to those stored in its memory and confirmed her identification.

"I've found Rogue!" she gasped.

"Where?" Logan asked.

"Just a few blocks west of here," Jean replied. "So close that I should have picked her up long ago. But some force is shielding her. I could feel it trying to block me out just now. And her mind is different than before. That made it harder to recognize."

"Is she moving?" Scott asked.

Jean winced at a fresh pang of pain. But now that she finally had a lock on one of her teammates, no mere headache would break her concentration. "Not at the moment," she said.

"That's one piece of luck, anyway," her husband said. "Let's go get her."

They scrambled back into the Blazer. Wolverine put the vehicle in gear and sent it hurtling back on to the street, driving with a reckless disregard for the slick streets and poor visibility. Until, cresting a rise and peering down an incline, he saw the flooded declivity ahead. Snarling in frustration, he stamped on the brake pedal, and the Blazer squealed to a halt.

"Don't worry about it," said Jean, willing her clothing to reconfigure itself into her uniform. The dancing sparks crackled and prickled against her skin. "Just suit up and get out of the car. I can get us to Rogue faster than it could anyway."

Are you sure? Scott asked her across their telepathic link. *I can feel how hard you're working just to stay in contact with her.*

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Then why are you putting one more demand on my psi by talking to me this way? she wondered crossly, but didn't project the thought. Hoping that he hadn't sensed her annoyance, she replied, *Don't worry. I can handle it.*

Fair enough. He jumped from the car, discarded his trench-coat and crimson glasses, and pulled up his cowl.

Meanwhile, Logan, moving with a feral quickness and fluidity, completed his own change. "Ready when you are," he said.

Phoenix glanced skyward and was pleased to see that no hovercraft were floating in the immediate vicinity. She levitated with her telekinesis, then picked up Scott and Wolverine. When she'd first learned to wield the power, she sometimes imagined that she possessed extra hands, invisible extremities with which she could move objects about, but it had been a long time since she'd needed any such crutch of the imagination. These days, the psychokinesis was simply itself, a faculty she employed with automatic ease.

Or generally speaking, she did. When she was already straining to maintain a telepathic interface with the mini-Cerebro and a lock on Rogue, when her head was already pounding, juggling three human-sized objects became rather more difficult. Still, she tried not to let the strain show in her face, or to let it bleed into Scott's mind. No point in worrying him or Logan, either.

Gosh, she thought with a flicker of amusement, *I guess I do want to be perfect for them after all.*

They soared through the driving rain, over the rooftops of the city. It was late enough that the sun must have been sinking directly in front of them, but she couldn't see any sign of it through the mountainous black clouds.

Jean's fix on Rogue guided her toward an old brick cube of a building that, with its big double doors, rather resembled a garage. She set her teammates gently down on the empty sidewalk in front of the place, then floated to the ground her-

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self. Near the doors was a vacant ticket booth, with the words NOSTALGIA CARRIAGE TOURS—DISCOVER HISTORIC NATCHEZ painted on the window in gold.

“She’s somewhere inside,” Phoenix said. “I can’t pinpoint her location any further than that.” She uncoupled her mind from the mini-Cerebro, and her headache abated.

Wolverine stalked to the double doors. From long experience, Jean knew that he was checking out the site with his inhumanly keen senses, though how he could use his sense of smell with a cheroot still smoldering in his mouth was a mystery she’d never fathomed. As she and Scott skulked up beside him, she murmured, “What are you picking up?”

“Rogue,” Logan said. “She put her hand right here—” he pointed to a spot on the right-hand door “—and shoved to break the lock. But her scent’s a little off—a little rank—like you said her brainwaves are. Other than her, I smell leather, axle grease, hay, and horses. The horses aren’t here anymore though. Guess the owner hauled them off to make sure they wouldn’t drown. Anyway, the point is, I ain’t pickin’ up anybody else, but of course that don’t guarantee she’s alone.”

“Understood,” said Cyclops. “We’re going in. Spread out as you step through the door.” If someone was lying in wait for them, he didn’t want him to be able to hit all three of them with a single shot. “Ready, set, go!”

Cyclops and Wolverine yanked open the doors and the three of them charged into a spacious, unlighted stable with a high ceiling. Bits of straw littered the concrete floor. As Logan had predicted, the stalls were empty, but a pair of the carriages remained, their shapes vague in the gloom. For some reason, they reminded Jean of a black horse-drawn hearse she’d seen in a Hammer horror movie when she was a little girl, an eerie-looking conveyance that had haunted her nightmares for weeks afterward.

No one attacked the X-Men. Nothing moved at all. The

rain clattered and hissed on the roof, the susurrant sound somehow magnifying the silence that prevailed inside the building.

For a moment Jean wondered if she'd brought her companions on a wild goose chase. Then Wolverine lifted his head, peering up at a loft that extended from the back wall. "'Lo, Rogue," he said.

Looking where he looked, Jean too finally spotted her missing teammate, a crouching shadow with a white streak shining in her dark, tousled hair. "Go away," Rogue said.

Cyclops eased closer to the loft. "It's us, Rogue—Cyclops, Phoenix, and Wolverine," he said. "We came to help you."

"You don't understand," Rogue groaned. The timbers beneath her creaked as if she were digging her super-strong fingers into them. "You have too much life. I can't resist."

Read her mind, said Scott to Jean across their psychic link. *We have to know what we're dealing with.*

I'm on it, Phoenix replied. She focused her telepathy on Rogue, only to encounter another painful and disorienting burst of mental static, like a flare of bright light burning straight into her eyes and a trumpet blaring directly into her ear, both at the same time. Frowning, she started digging her way through it.

Meanwhile, Logan said, "Come on, darlin', whatever's wrong, we can fix it. We always have before."

"No," said Rogue. For an instant her eyes seemed to gleam scarlet in the darkness. "He poisoned me. *Addicted* me."

"Who?" asked Scott.

"The red angel. He's callin' me. Drawin' me to him. And half the time, I want to go. I want to go so *bad!*"

"Go where?" Logan asked. "Where is he?"

"I don't know. I just have to follow the call."

"Is it—" Scott began.

"Ain't you listenin' to me?" Rogue exploded. "I told you to *get out of here!*"

Jean's telepathy abruptly drove through the barrier that had

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been holding her out of Rogue's consciousness. Unfortunately, that failed to end her difficulties. As she knew from past experience, it was immensely difficult to read her teammate's mind, probably because her psyche contained the fragmentary ghosts of so many different personalities, and at present, the problem was even worse than usual. Rogue's essence was in furious flux, a maelstrom of conflicting impulses whirling and thrashing like a maddened animal striving to rip itself apart.

Phoenix groped in the chaos, fighting to capture some coherent impression. After a moment, a barrage of images assailed her, thrusting her into the perspective of the viewpoint persona. Faster and stronger than any ordinary human, she leapt on her victims and tore them apart, reveling in their pain, their terror, and the spurting of their beautiful, fragrant blood. She moaned in horror, and her stomach churned. Then the agitation in Rogue's mind, possibly aided by her own revulsion, hurled her out.

"We can't just walk away when you're in trouble," said Logan to Rogue. "You know us better than that. Besides, even if you don't want our help, we need you to help us find Ororo."

"Ororo," Rogue repeated. She sobbed, and then the sound melted into a cruel laugh that made Jean's skin crawl. "If you want her, look on the bottom of the river. Or maybe she's floated all the way to the Gulf of Mexico by now."

"What exactly are you saying?" asked Scott, his voice nearly as steady and calm as usual. Jean imagined that only she could have discerned the tension in it.

Rogue cackled. "You know what I'm saying. I ate her. I drank her down." She extended her arm at Scott, and suddenly the air smelled of ozone.

Cyclops frantically leapt to the side. A dazzling bolt of electricity shot from Rogue's fingertips, blasting the patch of floor where her teammate had just been standing, proof that the female mutant truly had absorbed Storm's powers. Though

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Scott had escaped a direct hit, the force of the explosion still staggered him.

"I warned you!" cried Rogue. "Why wouldn't you listen?" The vicious mockery was gone from her voice. Now she sounded anguished and distraught again. But she dove from the loft like a hawk swooping down on a mouse, and as she did so, Jean saw that the other woman's outstretched hands were bare.

Phoenix frantically interposed a telekinetic barrier between Rogue and Scott. Wolverine spat out his cheroot and ran to intercept the seemingly homicidal mutant, his claws leaping from his wrists with a sharp yet sibilant snikt. Jean hated to see the adamantium blades emerge, but she knew that her friend had made the right choice. Besides, the claws could do no serious injury to Rogue's near-invulnerable form.

Rogue slammed into the psychokinetic shield and rebounded. Jean felt a shock, almost as if she'd been holding the barrier in her hand. Logan sprang into the air, slashing, but missed Rogue by an inch. She turned and hurtled at Jean.

Phoenix reflexively tried a mental bolt, but it had no effect. *Stupid!* she thought. If she could barely even probe Rogue's mind, she should have known that she wouldn't be able to stun it. She reached out with her telekinesis, grabbed one of the carriages, and swung it at her teammate as if it were a club.

Rogue dodged, veering higher. The carriage streaked beneath her and tumbled on to demolish the fencing enclosing two of the stalls. Grinning and so exposing a pair of fangs, she streaked closer. Jean threw up another psychokinetic shield.

A wind as strong as a hurricane smashed into her back, flinging her into the barrier she'd just created, slamming her forehead against it. The shield blinked out of existence, and, dazed, she sprawled on the wooden floor, the mini-Cerebro slipping from her grasp.

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Stupid again! Even though she'd just seen her opponent throw a lightning bolt, she'd fought as if she were only battling Rogue, not Rogue and Storm in one package.

Rogue landed and crouched over her, reaching for her face. Jean struggled to fling the other woman backward with her telekinesis, but muddled as she was, the power wouldn't respond.

A crimson ray blazed across the barn. It caught Rogue in the side and smashed her through a wooden support column. Jean realized that Scott had recovered his equilibrium just in time to save her.

Logan sprinted after Rogue, but failed to reach her before she levitated back into the air. They traded furious attacks. Thanks to his animal reflexes and martial arts expertise, he dodged all of her monstrously strong punches and grabs. Meanwhile his gleaming claws shredded her uniform, but at best merely grazed the skin beneath.

Scott circled the *melée*, obviously looking for a clear shot. Jean staggered to her feet, rubbed her aching forehead, and tried to clear her mind sufficiently to bring her psi into play.

Cyclops fired another optic blast, which missed and bashed a hole in the wall. A split second later, Rogue finally connected with a punch to Logan's left temple. The impact made a sharp *crack!* Jean knew that her teammate's adamantium-reinforced skull couldn't be broken, but the blow still smashed him to the floor, where he sprawled motionless. Rogue floated lower and reached for him as if she intended to take him in her arms and kiss him.

Advancing, Scott battered her with narrowly focused, high-intensity beams. Jean was afraid that Rogue would absorb Logan's essence anyway, since ordinarily the process only took an instant. But perhaps the barrage, powerful enough to sting even her, enraged her, because she hissed and flew at her attacker.

Cyclops dodged from her path and shot her again, jolting

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her sideways. She waved her hand, and howling wind gusted, lashing Jean's hair. Scott lurched into the air and hung there. Suspended in an updraft, he wouldn't be able to evade Rogue's next attack.

Phoenix grabbed for Rogue with her psychokinesis, but her power was still too feeble to immobilize the other woman. Breaking free of the hold, Rogue looked over her shoulder and cried, "Run! While I'm . . . taking him, you and Logan can get away!"

"Don't hurt him!" said Jean, simultaneously employing her telepathy in an attempt to project the same message deep into Rogue's mind. "He's your friend! We're *all* your friends!"

Spinning all the way around, Rogue threw out her hand. Jean levitated up and to the side, and the sizzling bolt of lightning missed her, blasting another section of floor into splinters. Scott fell heavily out of the air, landing with a thud.

Phoenix expected Rogue to follow up with another attack, but instead she streaked straight upward. The telepath made another psychokinetic grab for her, but missed outright. *Stop her!* she called to Cyclops, mind to mind.

Scrambling to one knee, Scott oriented on Rogue. His right hand closed, but no ray shot from his eyes. Jean felt his shock of consternation. He reached for the firing stud on the right side of his visor, but by that time Rogue was already smashing through the roof like a cannonball. When his optic blast did blaze forth, it merely shone through the ragged breach she'd left behind.

Jean flew up toward the hole, noticing as she did how slowly she was rising, and how much concentration it was taking. She wouldn't be able to keep up with Rogue even if she left her companions behind. Reluctantly she drifted back to the floor.

If she or Scott had taken the punch that felled Logan, they would likely have been unconscious for hours or even days

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assuming they survived at all. But Wolverine sprang to his feet, instantly dropped into a fighting stance, and pivoted this way and that to locate the enemy.

"You can relax," Scott said glumly, standing up considerably more slowly. "She got away."

Retracting his claws, the Canadian scowled. "I saw that last punch coming, Cyke. I *saw* it and I still didn't duck it."

"I didn't handle myself all that brilliantly either," Phoenix said.

"And I couldn't shoot her when I needed to," Cyclops said. He undid the hidden flap in the palm of his yellow glove and peered at the wafer-thin panel of buttons and circuitry inside. "My visor controls broke. The safety didn't release. It must have happened when Rogue dropped me." He shook his head in bewilderment. "But it shouldn't have happened. The mechanism is built too sturdily, and I just serviced it two days ago."

"I guess now we know what they mean by amateur night in Dixie," Logan said sourly.

Jean was sure that Wolverine meant to indict his own performance as much or more than anyone else's, but it was obvious from the flare of anger in Scott's mind that he assumed the remark had been aimed specifically at him. "I'm telling you," he said, glaring, "I checked it, and it was fine."

"Who said any different?" Logan said, manifestly angry in his turn. "I'm sure the gadget did look fine to *you*. The same way it *looked* like I was going to gut that moron with the shotgun."

"No one who knows you would blame me for worrying that—"

"That's enough!" Jean said sharply, profoundly annoyed at having to play peacemaker yet again. The two of them were like squabbling little boys. "Rogue is immensely powerful. It's nobody's fault that she got away from us this time around, and it's idiotic to take our disappointment out on each other."

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Scott grimaced. "You're right." He looked Wolverine in the eye. "Sorry if I overreacted to what you said."

Logan shrugged. "Whatever."

Suppressing a fresh twinge of irritation, Cyclops said, "We'll take a moment to catch our breath, then get after her. Fortunately . . ." He turned, then stiffened in dismay.

Jean looked where he was looking, then felt sick to her stomach. Perhaps Rogue hadn't actually been aiming that final electrical discharge at her after all. In any case, the lightning had blasted the mini-Cerebro into a lump of melted plastic and fused circuitry.

Wolverine turned toward Phoenix. "Still, Jean," he said, "now that you found her once, you ought to be able to lock in on her again, right?"

"I hope so," she said, but privately, she doubted it.

"I should have brought a backup unit," said Scott somberly.

"Don't start," Jean told him. "You can't anticipate every contingency. I don't think we've ever lost a mini-Cerebro before."

"She's right," Logan said, surprising her. Perhaps he'd belatedly remembered his promise to be nicer. "Don't blame yourself." He flashed a crooked grin. "That's my job. Look, if we ain't ready to move out, maybe we should talk about what just happened. Starting with the obvious, Rogue's gone crazy."

"Yes," Scott said. "She wanted to warn us off and kill us at the same time. I imagine you noticed the red eyes and the fangs. I think our earlier guess was right. She's absorbed another personality that's fighting her true identity for control."

"I got inside her mind for a moment," said Jean, "and judging from the turmoil and the clashing tendencies I found there, I think you're right. But as far as we can tell, she took in the other person's energy hours ago. Normally the effect would have worn off by now."

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“Yeah,” said Logan, extracting a crumpled pack of cheeroots and a book of matches from a pouch in his wide scarlet leather belt. Jean noticed that his left eye was badly bloodshot, but the discoloration was fading by the second. “Normally. But Rogue said that ‘the red angel,’ whoever *he* is, ‘poisoned’ and ‘addicted’ her. I’m guessing that means he tricked her into sucking in a personality that would mess her up really bad. That would make her want or maybe even *need* to use her leech power.”

“I agree,” said Scott, “and evidently the point was to turn her into a creature who will do his bidding. But why? What does he want her for?”

“Impossible to guess until we find out who he is,” Logan said, lighting his smoke. “But in any case, we’ve got to face the fact that she probably really did kill all those civilians.”

“But she’s fighting her cravings,” Jean said. “She tried to restrain herself from attacking us, and then she broke away from the fight, even though she had an excellent chance of finishing us off. There still *could* be a case of mistaken identity.” The protest sounded lame to the point of absurdity, even to her.

“I suppose it’s *possible*,” said Logan, manifestly humoring her, “but to be honest, I think you’re grasping at straws. The way I figure it, the part of her that’s still Rogue cares about us. She wouldn’t feel the same way about a stranger, and that could make it impossible for her to hold herself back. Besides, there’s no doubt that she drained ‘Roro.’”

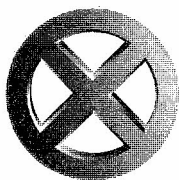
Jean sighed. “No, there isn’t, is there? And when I looked in her mind, I glimpsed memories where she was gleefully stalking and murdering people. Of course, those *could* be recollections of things that the foreign personality did in its original body, but even if they are, they still show just how eager the new Rogue is to hurt people. It’s simply that I don’t want to believe the worst.” Her eyes stung, brimming with unshed

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tears. She blinked them away. "Do you think there's *any* chance that Storm is still alive?"

"Yes," said Scott firmly, putting his hand gently on her shoulder. "Especially since Rogue's power doesn't ordinarily kill people outright."

No, thought Jean bleakly, *but now Rogue wants to kill, and she said she threw Ororo into the river*. She struggled to give her teammates a brave smile, and also to do what was immeasurably more difficult: keep the leaden despair in her own heart from echoing in her husband's mind.



CHAPTER 9



His gleaming metallic face contorted with hatred, his massive fists clenching, Piotr took a stride across the *Midnight Runner's* deck toward Belasco. Kurt could easily imagine his friend charging and crashing through the rear of the cabin. He grabbed the hulking Russian by the arm. "Easy!" he said. "He's not really here. It's only some sort of projection. See how the light shines through?"

"Da," said Colossus thickly. He looked as if he would have liked to attack the phantom even so, simply to vent his rage, but he halted his forward advance.

"Very observant," said Belasco, leering at Kurt. "Of course, you always were one of the more clever X-Men. That was why I chose you to be my body servant."

Nightcrawler wanted to snarl, *That wasn't me!* But he stifled the impulse. He didn't want Belasco to see that his taunts could get under his skin.

"To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?" asked Dracula, his crimson eyes gleaming in the dimness.

"I came to reason with you," said the horned man. "To persuade you to go away and leave me to finish my business in peace."

"You must be as crazy as you are depraved," Colossus growled.

Belasco sighed and shook his head. "Poor, foolish Piotr. You've borne such a heavy burden of anger for so long, and your rancor is based on a misapprehension. You think I tortured Illyana, but the truth is more complex. As often as not, she delighted in the life I gave her. Someday, when we have the time, I'll tell you of the exquisite pleasures we shared, pleasures of the spirit and—"

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The Russian resumed his advance. "You filthy, lying—" "Sure he's lying," said Kitty from the cockpit. "So don't let him get to you!"

Though trembling with rage, Piotr halted once more.

"You must know we won't just turn around and go away," Amanda said. Her face was very pale—Kurt suspected that something about Belasco's projection was oppressive to her mystical perceptions, or else that she was simply afraid—but her dulcet voice was steady.

"But you're already too late to stop me," Belasco replied, the end of his pointed tail casually coiling, then straightening again. "The Elder Gods will return this very night." Kurt felt a shock of dismay. "The sun will rise—assuming that it pleases them to permit it to rise—on a glorious new world. With your various talents, you could win places of honor in the new order." He gave Nightcrawler another malignant smile. "I can guarantee from past experience that you at least would be happy worshipping at the altars of Hell, happier than you've ever been before. You have no conception of the appetites slumbering in your soul."

"If your victory is already a fait accompli," asked Dracula dryly, stalking closer to the apparition, "then why do you care if we come to Natchez or not?"

"I'd simply like to ease my mind," Belasco said. The *Midnight Runner* bounced in the turbulence, and for an instant, the insubstantial form of the sorcerer failed to move in perfect sync with it. His red-booted feet slipped into the floor. "It would be nice, though by no means essential, to be able to concentrate on the work of high magic before me without the distraction of knowing that you're roaming the night hunting me. In truth, Your Grace, though I made my offer of amnesty in good faith, I don't expect your new minions to abandon the chase. There's too much bad blood between us. Nor does the prospect of their continued opposition trouble me. They're nothing by themselves, which you know as well as I. Indeed,

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it would be convenient to have them close at hand after the Dark Ones return, when I'll have the leisure to settle old scores. But I concede there's a chance, albeit a slim one, that you yourself could prove a bit more troublesome. Yet you and I have never been adversaries before, and I see no reason why we shouldn't reach an accommodation now. Can't we discuss our situation like gentlemen?"

Dracula glided closer to him, his ink-black cloak sweeping noiselessly down the aisle. "Very well," he said. "Make your case."

Piotr opened his mouth, obviously to blurt out a protest. Kurt whispered, "Quiet!"

"But—"

"If Dracula's inclined to change sides, I'd rather find out now. Besides, if we let Belasco talk, we might learn something."

Colossus nodded grimly. "Very well."

Kurt pivoted toward Amanda to ask her if she could trace the magic responsible for Belasco's projection back to its source. But, her eyes closed, the blonde sorceress was murmuring under her breath and making sinuous gestures with her left hand. Nightcrawler assumed that she was either already trying to find the warlock or attempting something else worthwhile, so he left her to do it undisturbed.

Meanwhile, Belasco said, "As I see it, Your Grace, we're two of a kind. We're both immortal. We both aspire to sit in dominion over the common run of humanity, and very sensibly so, considering the eldritch might and wisdom we possess. We even share common enemies in these wretched X-Men, for all that you've currently cozened them into your service. Surely we're natural allies."

Watching the two tall figures converse, the one a devil incarnate in scarlet and gold, the other a dead yet animate creature of shadow and bone-white pallor, for a moment Kurt couldn't help perceiving them as Belasco did. They *were* true

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princes of evil, uncanny beings who'd broken the shackles of time, with minds subtle beyond any mortal's understanding and powers that no mere mutant could match. They made him feel like a child eavesdropping on some profound and incomprehensible adult conversation. He struggled to push the demoralizing comparison and the uneasiness that had produced it out of his head.

"I've seldom had much use for allies," Dracula said. "I much prefer vassals."

"Perhaps that's because hitherto, you'd never encountered your equal," Belasco said. "Now at last you have. Join me, Count, and I promise that the Elder Gods will favor you as they do me. You and I will rule the world as their satraps."

The vampire nodded gravely. "My kingdom come at last."

"Exactly. So why not turn and slaughter the mutants and their tame witch?"

"How satisfying that would be," Dracula said. Pivoting, he gave the members of Excalibur a diabolical smile, and Kurt felt the hairs on the nape of his neck stand on end. "None of them could withstand me, not even the little Kitten with her ability to become a phantom. I could mesmerize her and compel her to turn solid again, just as I could force the peasant to batter his comrades to pulp, then discard his armor and bare his throat when his work was through." Nightcrawler prepared himself to lunge and attack the vampire, but then, his mantle swirling, the creature in black turned back to face Belasco. "But alas, now is not the time for that particular indulgence."

The sorcerer frowned. "May I ask why not?"

"I've given them my oath."

Belasco shook his head. "I never expected such puerile sentimentality from you."

"Which demonstrates how little you understand me. In point of fact, magician, I find your remarks presumptuous and offensive, because despite some superficial similarities in our histories, our characters are in no manner alike. For all your

pretensions to majesty, you're merely a lackey groveling at the feet of your precious Dark Ones. Whereas Dracula recognizes no power greater than himself."

"You would," Belasco said, "if you beheld my gods in all their grandeur."

Dracula sneered. "I trust not."

"Curse your blasphemy and your arrogance!" Belasco snapped. "They are our creators, our fathers and mothers in darkness. All that we are, we owe to them."

"I dare say that's true of you," said the lord of the undead. "I doubt you could turn milk into butter until you knelt to accept the Elder Gods' yoke. But I'm not beholden to any other creature of darkness. I *am* darkness. I've spat in the faces of both Jehovah and Mephisto in my time, and when I claim the rulership of the world, I'll reign as its absolute master, not some self-proclaimed deity's viceroy and assuredly not as coemperor with the pathetic likes of you. And even were it otherwise, you *stole* from me, Belasco. You dared to subvert my covenant, and that insult I can never forgive."

"So be it," said the ghostly figure in red. The suaveness was all but gone from his voice, replaced by a throbbing note of anger. "I thought that I might have found a peer and a kindred spirit at last, but evidently I was mistaken. Spurn me then, and perish in your folly and your pride."

"It will take more than you and your masters to slay me."

His urbanity reasserting itself, Belasco smiled. "Indeed. Well, blood-drinker, we shall see. We've been talking together for awhile now. Long enough for me to establish a steady current of magic from my sanctuary to your airplane, a channel of power I can use to send you another visitor. It's the least of the spawn of the Dark Ones, a minnow among whales, an entity so paltry by comparison that Agamotto's wards of imprisonment failed to recognize it for what it was and bind it. If you can cope with its attentions, then it will be time enough to consider how you might fare against its kin."

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The sorcerer's image vanished. A split second later, the *Runner* lurched as if some giant had pounded it with his fist. If not for his clinging power, Kurt might well have been hurled from his feet. Piotr stumbled and snatched at one of the consoles of the ECM station to keep from falling. Dracula maintained his balance by dropping into a crouch, like a black panther ready to pounce on an adversary. He bared his fangs, and his red eyes gleamed.

The jet listed to port and plummeted, while Kitty frantically fought the controls. At last she pulled the *Runner* out of its dive. Nightcrawler heard the engines roaring, pushed to their limit, and simultaneously realized that the cabin had grown darker. Something black was covering the windows.

"Belasco's monster just dropped on top of us," said Shadowcat tensely, "and it seems to be about as big and heavy as the plane. It's messing with the ailerons, and even if it wasn't, the *Runner* was never meant to carry this kind of load. Smooth move, Drac. You just had to have your little chat with Belasco, didn't you?"

"Do you honestly think he would have simply slunk away without attacking if I'd refused to speak to him?" the vampire replied scornfully. "Besides, I was trying to hypnotize him. It *might* have worked, even though he was only present in his astral form."

"Can you roll the ship?" Amanda said to Kitty. "Maybe shake the creature off?"

"You must be kidding," Kitty replied. "It's a miracle that we're still in the air at all." The *Runner* abruptly dove again, and she fought the controls until the nose came up once more.

Though Kurt was concerned by their situation, he also realized that the dismay he'd felt previously had yielded to excitement. He'd far rather pit his team and himself against an immediate physical challenge, something that could be outwitted or outfought, than endure any more of Belasco and Dracula's verbal sparring. He wondered fleetingly if the ex-

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hilaration with which he greeted the danger actually did reflect the streak of darkness which both the sorcerer and the vampire had claimed to discern in his spirit, then pushed the thought from his mind. Even if it was true, it scarcely mattered at the moment.

He pivoted toward Amanda. "Belasco sent the monster with magic. Can you get rid of it the same way?"

"I'll try," the sorceress said. She rose from her seat, and the transport's shaking instantly threatened her equilibrium.

Kurt shifted behind her and put his hands around her waist. "I've got you, *liebchen*," he said. "Just cast your spell."

Raising her hands above her head, throwing her head back, Amanda chanted rhymed iambic couplets in a language her lover didn't recognize. The pace accelerated as she went along. The temperature in the cabin fluctuated, stifling hot one moment and freezing cold the next. Kurt felt as if mites were crawling through his dark blue fur. A ball of silvery light bloomed in the air before Amanda, then grew brighter and brighter, until at last it exploded in a dazzling, silent flash.

Kurt turned toward the nearest window. Blackness still covered the outside.

"I'm sorry," Amanda said. "I can't exorcise it."

"Useless," Dracula said, sneering.

Kurt felt Amanda tense and wince. "That's enough of that," he snapped at the vampire.

The fuselage began to groan and shriek.

"Oh, joy," Kitty said. "If it can't make us crash, it'll break open the plane and eat us. Or whatever it is that little baby Elder Gods do to people they don't like."

"We could ditch," Amanda said.

"I can't see where I'm going," said Shadowcat, "but I know we're flying over a populated area. I don't want the *Runner* to crash on top of somebody."

"And I shall not run from Belasco's pet," Piotr said with a growl.

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Dracula nodded. "Spoken like a warrior."

"I agree," said Kurt. "We should fight, especially since the creature may be capable of picking off at least some of us as we make our way to the ground. We're better off tackling it as a team. Here's how we'll do it. Shadowcat, you keep flying." While Kitty's phasing power might allow her to venture outside the plane without being swept away by the slipstream, she couldn't strike at the monster while she was intangible. Nor were her martial arts skills, devastating as they could be against many opponents, likely to be much use against such a behemoth. "Hold us as steady as possible, reduce our speed as much as you can, and put us over the Mississippi. Amanda, you stay here and keep trying to exorcise the demon." The sorceress too would be unable to operate effectively outside the plane, and in any case, her style of magic didn't require her to make physical contact with its targets. "Colossus, Dracula, we're going to go introduce ourselves to the monster. Questions?" No one had any. The roof of the transport creaked and buckled inward. The former circus star favored his comrades with a daredevil grin. "Excellent. Let's go teach our uninvited passenger some manners."

Nightcrawler yanked open a locker, removed a parachute, and quickly buckled it on. Unlike Amanda's magical teleportation, his mutant gift was constrained by certain physical laws. If he teleported while he was moving, he'd arrive at this destination still possessing the same momentum. Which meant that if he fell from a great height, teleporting wouldn't save him.

He drew his saber with its gleaming, well-honed blade and scratched, battered brass guard, then turned toward Amanda, intending to give her a fencer's salute and a wink. But, seated once more, her blue eyes wide and focused on phenomena he couldn't see, the Gypsy was already crooning another spell. So he simply moved to the hatch with Piotr and Dracula, neither of whom had bothered with a chute. In his metallic form,

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Colossus could endure any fall without injury, and the vampire could assume another form to reach the ground safely.

Kurt would have preferred simply to teleport from the cabin onto the monster's back. But just as he couldn't shed momentum by using his power, he also couldn't displace himself safely to a destination he couldn't see and didn't know. If he tried, he might arrive with his body partly or wholly inside another object, a mishap that would maim or kill him. Thus, with the creature's mass obscuring the windows, it was better that he use the door.

Piotr pressed the buttons mounted on the frame in the proper sequence and the hatch started to slide aside. At once a cascade of black, wetly gleaming tendrils of flesh writhed through the opening, crumpling the shifting metal panel and engulfing the two mutants and the monarch of the undead behind it.

Tentacles, some as thick as Kurt's forearm, others no bigger around than a baby's finger, encircled his body, binding and crushing him like an army of anacondas. With a muffled report and a puff of sulfurous smoke—leakage from the other dimension through which he displaced himself—he teleported out of the monster's clutches, then attacked it with his saber. It was like hacking at tough rubber, but the demon's limbs parted, splashing blobs of phosphorescent amber ichor about, filling the air with a vile, corrosive stench.

Meanwhile, his face a mask of rage, Piotr employed his prodigious strength to grab the creature's arms, sometimes five or six at once, and tear them to pieces. Dracula, no match for the Russian in terms of raw muscular power but still many times stronger than any ordinary human, was doing essentially the same thing, while simultaneously changing shape to keep the demon from getting a solid grip on him. One moment he was the towering, white-faced man in the cloak, then a huge gray wolf with foam flying from its snapping jaws, then a

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black, clawing hybrid of human and bat, and then a column of pearly, swirling mist.

No matter how hard the mutants and their ally fought, more tentacles kept squirming through the opening, constantly threatening to overwhelm them. But at last Colossus ripped away a fresh knot of them, opening a breach in the curtain of flesh and revealing a fleeting glimpse of what lay on the other side. It was the opportunity Kurt had been awaiting, and he instantly attempted to teleport himself onto the *Midnight Runner's* stubby wing, its contours all but obscured by the attacking monster's twisting, heaving limbs.

Nightcrawler's power worked virtually instantaneously. He never perceived the extradimensional space through which he traveled, nor did he have any sensation of motion. Rather, the world seemed to change around him. One second he was inside the cabin, and the next, atop the carpet of rippling black limbs that carpeted the wing. Huge gray clouds filled the night sky all around him, turning the universe into a cavernous vault. Flares of lightning flickered in their bellies.

At once the freezing wind tried to hurl him from his perch. Raindrops peppered him like hailstones. Crouching and thus depriving the slipstream of leverage, he gripped the unsteady surface beneath him with the adhesive power of his feet and his empty hand, simultaneously entwining the end of his tail with one of the monster's limbs.

He no sooner anchored himself than tentacles reared up all around him, as if he were in the center of a circle of cobras. Grateful that for him, fighting in a crouch was as natural as doing so standing erect, he cut at the arms with his saber.

He hacked several of them in two, but others lashed him like whips, or looped around him with crushing strength. To escape their attentions, he teleported farther out on the wing, and at that moment, buffeted by the turbulence, the *Runner* bucked.

When Kurt arrived, the wing had dipped, becoming a ramp

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sloping down to an abyss. Since the wing was lower than he'd expected it to be, he failed to achieve a grip on it, and the slipstream and gravity conspired to send him flying into space.

Tucking, he turned the unexpected tumble into a controlled somersault, saw the edge of the wing streaking beneath him, snatched with his empty hand and feet, grabbed it, and, grunting with the strain, yanked himself back aboard. It was one of the greatest acrobatic feats he'd ever performed, and he thought it a pity that no one had seen it.

Tentacles menaced him once more. He suspected he could slash at the limbs all night without grievously hurting the demon. For all he knew, the thing might even be regrowing them. But presumably the creature had a central body containing vital organs, and that was what he needed to attack. Looking for it, he pivoted toward the long, sleek form of the *Midnight Runner's* fuselage, then faltered in surprise.

The cabin was full of noise. Amanda chanted in what Piotr assumed to be Latin. Kitty cried, "I don't know how much longer I can hold her!" The transport groaned and shrieked. The monster's flesh thudded and squelched as Colossus, Dracula, and Nightcrawler assailed it. Then Piotr tore a hole in the squirming clot of tentacles, and, with a muffled bang and a burst of smoke and brimstone, Nightcrawler vanished.

Colossus seized one fistful of dark, writhing limbs after another, ripping and ripping, trying to clear his own path to the outside. Beside him, Dracula, currently in the form of a canine as huge as a prehistoric dire wolf, rent the monster's arms with his gnashing jaws. The demon's glowing amber ichor streaked his muzzle.

At last the tentacles paused in their attack. Piotr tore away yet another knot of them, and then the way was clear. Before it could close again, he lunged forward, squirmed through, gripped some of the limbs encircling the exterior of the *Runner*

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and started to scale them as if they were a tangle of sturdy vines.

The howling slipstream battered him, doing its best to pry him loose from his perch. In his metallic form, he felt no discomfort, nor was the wind's strength any match for his own. Still, though more agile than most people would expect of such a large man, he was no acrobat like Kurt. One fumble and the relentless current of air might well dislodge him before he managed to catch himself. So he endeavored to climb carefully, the way Kurt had taught him, testing his holds.

Unfortunately, the monster had no intention of sitting idle while he concentrated on his ascent to the top of the plane. Tentacles pounded him, yanked at him, and he fended them off as best he could. Until suddenly the thickest one he'd seen yet rammed itself between his midsection and the plane, coiled around his waist, and attempted to pull him backward.

Piotr knew that as soon as the big arm dragged him loose, it would fling him into space. He clung to his handholds with all his might, then saw the stress of the tug-of-war begin to snap the thinner tendrils of flesh in two. He hoped that the damage would dissuade Belasco's creature from its efforts, but it didn't. Evidently the monster was willing to maim itself to be rid of an adversary.

The last of Colossus's moorings started to shred, and then, to his surprise, the huge tentacle released him and lashed madly about. Looking around, Piotr saw Dracula in his black, half-human, half-bat form, clinging to the limb, savaging it with his talons and fangs, ripping away chunks of flesh. Other tentacles snaked toward the vampire, but they were too slow to rescue the larger arm. In another moment he shredded it in two.

The stump heaved, tossing Dracula off. In bat form or not, the undead creature would never be able to fly fast enough to catch up with the plane. Piotr threw out his arm and grabbed the edge of one of Dracula's furry, membranous wings. His

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remaining handhold gave a sickening jerk as it took the extra weight, but the demon's limbs remained in one piece while he pulled his ally back up against the flank of the plane.

The mutant and the vampire climbed on, battling tentacles every inch of the way.

Shadowcat studied the array of red lights on the instrument panel before her. If there hadn't been lives at stake, her situation would almost be funny.

I know there's a huge, heavy monster blocking your view and ripping the plane apart, Kitty, and just to make life even more interesting, the weather's the absolute pits, but you can fly the Runner a few more miles, can't you? Oh, and please keep the ride soft and steady. Because some of us are going to be hanging on the outside of the plane, and you mustn't bounce us off.

Sure, fuzzy elf, no problemo.

Yeah, right.

Amanda abruptly broke off her spellcasting to spit out something that Kitty suspected might be a Romany swear word. Twisting in her seat, the younger woman saw more tentacles writhing and snaking through the hatch. And without Petey, Kurt, and Dracula to block the way, there was nothing to stop them from slithering their way all the way up the cabin and into the cockpit.

Or rather, nothing but Amanda. Taking up a position halfway up the plane, clutching at a seat for balance with one dainty, crimson-gloved hand and gesturing with the other, the lovely blonde sorceress resumed her magic. First she conjured a round, floating shield of golden force, then hurled sizzling bolts of power. The mystical attacks seared the ends of the monster's tentacles, while the barrier danced back and forth, blocking the limbs that struck at her.

Kitty was somewhat relieved that the Gypsy was better able to affect the individual tentacles than the monster as a whole.

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But there were so many of them, streaking at her friend in a relentless onslaught! "Can you hold them?" the mutant yelled.

"Yes!" An especially large tentacle slammed into the shield, bashing it backward. Amanda likewise fell back a step, giving up ground.

Kitty turned back to her instruments and controls, then did her best not to think about what might be happening just a few feet behind her. Or about the fact that the *Runner* was presently about as aerodynamic as a grand piano. She'd trust her teammate to defend her back, focus calmly on the task before her as Wolverine and her other senseis had taught her, and fly.

Because of the tentacles, Kurt had half-consciously expected the demon to resemble a colossal octopus or jellyfish, and to some extent, it did. But when he turned, he saw that the creature's body, currently squatting midway between the *Runner*'s tail and nose, was a dark humanoid head ten feet high, with lean, chiseled features, blank, lambent yellow eyes, and pointed ears. A huge copy of his own features, in fact.

Lightning flared, illuminating the head and revealing its expression. It wore the perverse, sadistic smirk that Kurt had only seen on the features of that other Nightcrawler whom Belasco had broken to his will, and thereafter in a nightmare or two.

Startled and repulsed, the mutant simply gaped at the monster for a moment, until he noticed the stealthy glide of a thin tentacle across his throat. The loop bit suddenly tight like a garrote, but he teleported out of it before it could cut off his wind or slice into his flesh.

This time he managed a clean landing, reappearing immediately in front of the mammoth head. In the split second he needed to anchor himself, it flowed from a copy of his own features to one of Amanda's, her wide-eyed face a mask of

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panic and despair. He drove the saber into it. Amber ichor spurted, and the slipstream flung it away.

Tentacles reared about him, flailing and grasping. As he fought, he teleported repeatedly to elude them, always aware of just how easy it would be to bungle a shift and slip from the spine of the reeling plane. Meanwhile, the head, now mottled with the yellow stabs and gashes he'd inflicted on it, oozed from Amanda's countenance to Piotr's, his ordinarily pleasant features twisted into an ugly scowl of rage.

Before long, the strain of making so many jumps in rapid succession began to take its toll. Nightcrawler moved to deflect a tentacle with the guard of his saber, but the arm whipped under his guard and, before he could execute a second parry, clipped him on the temple. His vision blurred with the jab of pain, and other limbs battered and clutched him.

Then Colossus and Dracula clambered onto the top of the plane.

If the Russian even noticed that the monster had reproduced his own face, the discovery didn't seem to faze him. More or less crawling to make sure he didn't take a fall, Piotr dragged himself to the base of the gargantuan head, grabbed its jowl with one hand, and punched it with the other. His steel fist plunged into the monster's flesh as easily as had Kurt's blade.

Dracula, a snarling gargoyle with long, pointed ears and enormous wings, tightly folded at the moment to keep them from catching the wind, raked the head's other profile with his claws. A heavy tentacle whirled at the back of his own misshapen skull, and, somehow sensing the blow, he ducked beneath it.

The limbs attacking Kurt faltered for the instant he needed to pull himself together and teleport. With Piotr and Dracula now fighting there, there was no room for anyone else to attack the giant head from the front, so he jumped on top of it, noting that, though it currently looked like steel, it still felt like rubbery flesh. Perched on that new vantage point, he noticed the

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lights of a city beneath the *Runner*, and, a bit farther ahead, a broad, black expanse that must be the Mississippi River.

For the next half minute, he cut at the monster furiously, trying to strike at its eyes. Meanwhile, his allies assailed the creature just as savagely. But no matter how many shining yellow wounds they inflicted, the creature's tentacles bashed and clutched at them relentlessly, until, gasping, he began to wonder if it was even possible to kill it.

The monstrous head flowed into a facsimile of Dracula's aquiline, arrogant human countenance. Deep puncture wounds, many of them the product of his own fist, marred the portrait, but as far as Colossus could tell, they hadn't even slowed the demon down.

Time for another approach, then, repugnant though it would be. He grabbed the lip of the one of the punctures and yanked downward, turning the hole into a long gash. Then he started to squirm his way inside it.

Wet, reeking flesh, a blackness streaked with amber phosphorescence, enfolded his upper body, effectively blinding him. It might have suffocated him as well, except that in his armored form, he did not breathe. But the acrid stench of its fluids was almost unbearably foul.

He felt tentacles looping about his legs, and kicked madly to dislodge them before they could drag him back out. Clutching at the monster's substance, he dragged himself entirely inside it, then struggled to his knees.

The demon's tissues clenched around him like a fist, a terrible peristalsis that threatened to immobilize him and might in time even pulverize his armored body. He retaliated by tearing at the monster furiously. If the creature had vital organs, his rending hands would encounter them sooner or later. If not, then he'd simply continue until he demolished the entire mass.

Eventually, after what seemed an eternity spent sightless

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and constricted in this reeking, claustrophobic cavity, his fingers raked through a lobed node of flesh softer than the dense, rubbery meat surrounding it. Then the demon's body suddenly melted into slime. He grinned, but his satisfaction was short-lived. With nothing solid anchoring him in place, he lost his balance, slid on the layer of jelly beneath him, and tumbled off the plane.

When the monster dissolved into glop, Kurt abruptly had nothing to cling to. Hanging in midair, he started to teleport back onto the *Midnight Runner's* spine, then perceived just in time that the nose was dropping while the plane as a whole was spinning on its axis. The wing whirled around at him like an immense black fly swatter.

With the transport spinning, it would be impossible to jump back aboard, even if there was any point to it. He frantically shifted himself across the sky, out of harm's way, then looked on helplessly as the jet hurtled on and vanished in the darkness. Praying that his companions too would get off safely, Kurt pulled his ripcord.

The stink of ichor and scorched demon flesh burned in Kitty's nose and throat, all but choking her. "Just so you know," Amanda panted, "I'm about six feet behind you. The tentacles keep pushing me back."

"Got it," the younger woman said, keeping her eyes locked on her instruments. The monster's limbs rustled on the floor, whizzed through the air. Amanda shouted a magic word, and her mystical bolts crackled, the flashes illuminating the interior of the plane.

Then came a splashing, squelching sound, and the layer of limbs obscuring the window in front of Kitty dissolved into fluid, which instantly began to stream away.

Kurt, Piotr, and Dracula must have succeeded in killing the demon. What's more, she could now see Natchez beneath her,

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and the Mississippi, dead ahead. By some miracle, she'd piloted the *Runner* where it needed to go.

Tortured metal shrieked. The plane dropped, spun, and with a final flicker of red warning lights, the controls went dead. She heard a thump and a slosh: Amanda falling and melted monster flesh slopping around.

She twisted in her seat to make sure the sorceress was all right. She was, bouncing around inside the rotating cabin like laundry tumbling in a dryer, but conscious and unharmed. "Get to the ground!" Kitty cried.

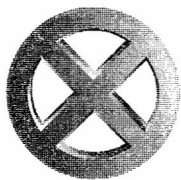
"Right!" Amanda said, then disappeared.

Shadowcat phased, then, waiting until the *Runner* was upright, rose from her chair, passing effortlessly through the straps of her safety harness and standing not on the floor but on the air itself. The plane hurtled on, its substance penetrating hers as harmlessly and painlessly as the belts had, leaving her behind in an instant. It raced on toward the surface of the river, flying to pieces in the moment before it hit.

Kitty peered about the rain-swept sky. Presumably Petey, Kurt, and Dracula had all survived the fight with the monster, then jumped clear as the *Runner* began its final dive. Having plummeted in free fall, Colossus would already be on the ground by now, but perhaps she could spot Nightcrawler dangling from his parachute, or the vampire flapping around on his leathery wings. Yet even when the lightning strobed, she found herself standing alone in the void beneath the storm clouds and the earth.

Which might well mean that the team had been thoroughly scattered, and there was no telling how much precious time it would take them all to find one another again.

Unaffected by the frigid wind and the downpour, she ran toward the ground as if she were jogging down an invisible ramp.



CHAPTER 10



Shivering, the woman who now remembered that her name was Ororo peered longingly through the window of a Circle K convenience store. Though the establishment was closed and dark, like nearly all of the businesses she'd passed in the course of her wandering, she might be able to break in, steal some food, and, assuming no alarm went off, take shelter until morning. Enemies or not, she didn't want to continue aimlessly prowling the streets. She was weary and chilled to the bone, and her hunger was a fierce, cramping ache in her belly.

In the hours since she'd dragged herself from the spillway, her memory had continued to return in bits and pieces. She knew her name. She could see the loving faces of her parents, and recall the nightmare moment when the bomb exploded, killing them and leaving her buried in rubble beside her mother's corpse. After her escape she'd eked out a miserable existence in the back alleys of Cairo, friendless and often as cold and famished as she was right now, until the master thief Achmed el-Gibar took her in and taught her to steal. Still later, prompted by an unfathomable yet irresistible instinct, she'd trekked south to the Serengeti, her mother's native land, where she'd discovered her ability to control the weather. She used it to aid the local tribes, and in consequence they came to worship her as a deity.

So much was clear. But she was still unsure of the full extent of her powers or of precisely how to wield them, just as she had no idea of why or when she'd left Africa for America.

Please, Goddess, she silently prayed, heal me. Restore me to myself.

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Down the street and to her right, three figures emerged from the hissing rain. Two of them had rifles in their hands.

Perhaps, Ororo thought, the gunmen were nothing to do with her. Even if they were her enemies, it was entirely possible that they had yet to spot her in the gloom and the down-pour. Intending to hide, she skulked toward the corner of the convenience store as Achmed had taught her, whacking her with his rattan cane when she failed to move stealthily enough to suit him.

The two riflemen shouldered their weapons. The guns flashed, banged, and Ororo threw herself sideways. Twin holes appeared in the windows. If she hadn't dodged, at least one of the bullets would have caught her in the chest.

So much for the optimistic notion that the men meant her no harm, or that they had yet to notice her, for that matter. She sprinted for all she was worth, while the rifles banged, and glass cracked and shattered just behind her.

When she rounded the corner of the Circle K, she nearly ran headlong into two more men who were trotting the other way. The larger of the two, a pudgy man in a gleaming black slicker, had a sawed-off shotgun in his hand. The other, leaner and younger, his head shaved, carried a sledgehammer. He wore a white T-shirt that the storm had rendered transparent and glued to his torso, which bore the letters FOH.

The initials meant something to her, something abhorrent, but she had no time to try to tease it from her memory. At her sudden appearance, the fat man flinched backward, but his companion bellowed, raised the sledgehammer over his head, and charged.

Acting on instinct, she pointed her hand at him, and a gust of wind, powerful as a tornado, sprang up out of nowhere. The skinhead reeled backward, a crust of frost forming on the front of his body.

From the corner of her eye, Ororo glimpsed the other man pointing the shotgun at her. She pivoted, willing the freezing

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wind to batter him as well, but instead of shifting as she intended, it simply died.

She dropped low as someone—she could suddenly picture him too, a short, muscular man with bristling black hair and bushy side whiskers—had taught her. The gun boomed, and the blast streaked over her head. At the same instant, she swept out her right leg, snagged her attacker's ankle, and jerked him off his feet.

As he fell, he cracked his head against the white-painted cinderblock wall of the store, but the blow didn't stop him from clumsily trying to aim his weapon at her again. She straightened up and kicked him in the jaw. Bone snapped, and he slumped back, seemingly unconscious.

Orooro spun toward the skinhead. He was on his knees, whimpering and shuddering, no longer a threat. But she knew her first three attackers must even now be charging up behind her. She raced on, her boots splashing up water, and headed down a side street lined with strip malls, tire stores, and fast food franchises. She prayed that she could lose her pursuers somewhere along it.

Another band of men appeared in the murk ahead of her. Guns flashed and banged. "Mutant!" someone yelled.

Mutant. It was another piece of the puzzle. She *was* a mutant. It was the source of her powers, and for some reason, many ordinary people feared and hated her kind. But she had no time to ponder that piece of information, either. It was obvious that despite her efforts to go unnoticed, someone had spotted her and called out a posse of hunters to stalk her. They'd surrounded her, and now they were moving in for the kill.

If she could fly, she could soar over the perimeter of their circle and leave them all behind. She called for an updraft to carry her aloft, and the atmosphere responded to her will. But she realized immediately that the wind was bearing her along too slowly and that she was riding it too awkwardly, like a

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cow struggling to swim. Her gift was still weak, and her technique no better than on that long ago summer day in Kenya when it had first occurred to her to try flying. She couldn't escape by air after all, not in her present condition. All she'd succeeded in doing was making herself a better target.

Guns flickered, barked, and boomed. A bullet tugged at her sodden white tresses, startling her and breaking her concentration. The steady current of air supporting her dissolved into useless chaos. She fell the fifteen feet back onto the street.

Ororo landed heavily. The impact jabbed pain through her ankle and tumbled her sprawling on the asphalt. She scrambled to her feet and ran in the direction of a hamburger restaurant.

Beyond the building was a pair of green metal dumpsters. If she'd pulled far enough ahead of her pursuers to make them lose sight of her, she might be able to hide inside one of the bins. She poised herself to jump into the one on the right, and then a bullet cracked into it and, whining, ricocheted.

Too late. The hunters had her in their sights. Trying to quash her fear, to silence the insidious voice that whispered that no thief's trick or mutant ability would save her tonight, she dashed on. Her ankle throbbed with every other step.

Changing course whenever she glimpsed motion ahead of her, trying repeatedly and unsuccessfully to hide herself, she ran until she lost all sense of direction. Until the breath rasped in her throat, and her long stride decayed into an agonizing hobble. Until at last she found herself standing at bay on the lawn in front of a long, one-story brick elementary school, with a flagpole to her right, bike racks to her left, and the mob closing in on her like a noose.

She could see that there were about twenty of them, ordinary citizens armed, for the most part, with the sort of weapons anyone could legally purchase for hunting or home defense. She sensed that if she were operating at full capacity, she could scatter them easily, and the realization made her plight seem all the more galling.

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"What is wrong with you people?" she cried. "I have done nothing to you!"

She didn't actually expect anyone to answer. She thought they'd simply open fire again. But perhaps her frantic flight had served to convince them that she posed no real threat to them, and thus, now that they had her cornered, they were willing to take the time to justify themselves.

A heavysset, thirty-ish man in a John Deere cap said, "You got a lotta gall to ask that, lady, after you muties attacked our city!" He sounded genuinely outraged.

"You tell her, Arnie!" shouted someone else. "Hell, we all saw it on TV!"

"I do not care what you saw," Ororo said, "I was not involved." Despite the lacunae in her memory, she was certain of that.

Arnie laughed. "Sure you weren't. This weather just happened, didn't it? Even though all the scientists say that it violates the laws of nature. *You'd* never make a flood to drown all us *homo sapiens* like rats, would you, not a sweet little monster chick like you."

"You're wrong," Ororo said. Suddenly she remembered what she was doing in Natchez. "I came here to *stop* the rain. To help you."

"Nice try," Arnie said, "but you can't pull the wool over our eyes. We *know* you muties wanna wipe out every real human being in the world. Let's clean up the gene pool, boys." He lifted his .357. "We'll all shoot together, on three. One—"

"Wait!" yelled a skinny man in a nylon windbreaker who, Ororo now observed, was carrying not a weapon but a camcorder. "Let me get a better angle. I don't know if I can really shoot anything in this light, but if I can, I bet *Hard Copy*'ll pay plenty for it."

"Okay," Arnie said, "but hurry." The aspiring video journalist scuttled around the ring of hunters. "Two—"

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Prompted by a surge of instinct, Ororo thrust out her hands. Overhead, lightning flared and thunder crashed. Dazzling bolts of electricity sizzled from her fingers.

But once again, her control was lacking. Instead of striking any of her tormentors, her own personal lightning leaped harmlessly to the metal bike racks and flagpole.

The blinding, crackling blasts did startle the mob and send them reeling backward. Though the effort of casting the thunderbolts had all but drained her strength, Ororo plunged forward in an effort to break out of the ring.

For an instant she thought she was going to make it. Then someone clubbed her from behind. The blow spiked pain through her skull and knocked her down in the cold, wet grass.

"The freak tried to electrocute us!" someone exclaimed indignantly.

"No," she groaned, dazed. "Just shock you . . . would not kill . . ."

"Can you stand her up again?" asked the man with the camcorder. "It'll look better if you shoot her and then she falls."

"Forget it," Arnie said, suddenly looming over his prey and pointing his automatic at her face. "We need to finish her off before she tries any more tricks."

A shadow swept across the sky. Ororo thought it was shaped like an enormous bird, or at any rate, some sort of winged creature. An instant later, when it lit on the muddy, saturated ground, she saw that it was actually a tall, pale, black-bearded man wrapped in a high-collared cape. His aquiline features were by no means conventionally handsome, but, strong, intelligent, and proud, they were striking and magnetic nonetheless.

The mob jumped back at the newcomer's unexpected arrival, and he raked them with a contemptuous gaze. "I remember when cowardly rabble hunted supposed witches and heretics through the streets," he said in a deep, lightly ac-

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cented voice. "The quarry has changed, but I see the sport remains the same."

The man in the cloak radiated power and utter confidence. Indeed, his demeanor was so intimidating that the mob simply goggled at him for a moment. Finally Arnie swallowed and said, "You should have flown right on by, mutant. Now we're going to kill you too." His voice was a little shaky.

"You have no conception how fortunate you are," the stranger replied. "Out of deference to this lady's sensibilities, I will permit you to flee. But I hope you'll choose to stand your ground instead. She was telling the truth, you see. She would not have killed you, no matter how desperate her plight. I, on the other hand, would take profound pleasure in slaughtering you like the swine you are."

The hunters hesitated. Then Arnie spat an obscenity, pointed his .357 at the figure in black, and opened fire. In the next two seconds, all his companions did the same. The roar of their weapons was deafening.

Ororo cringed, but her would-be rescuer didn't fall. The sneer on his sensuous lips didn't even waver. It was as if the bullets slamming into his flesh were powerless to harm him, and indeed, though some of them must surely be hitting him in the head, they left no marks.

The guns fell silent as, one by one, the shooters exhausted their ammunition. The humans' savage expressions gave way to bewilderment and dismay. The pale man strode forward, his inky cape flowing behind him, someone emitted a high, quivering wail, and then the hunters turned and fled.

The stranger pounced on Arnie like a cat pouncing on a mouse, then hoisted him into the air. "You appear to be the leader of this pack of jackals," the cloaked man said, "so I think it only appropriate that you precede your followers into death. Rest assured, I'll send them traipsing after you soon enough." The white fingers of his left hand closed around

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Arnie's throat. The human thrashed and beat at him with his pistol, to no effect whatsoever.

"No!" said Ororo, dragging herself to her knees. "Don't!"

Turning toward her, the man in black arched an eyebrow. His face and body language betrayed no strain at all, for all that he was holding a full-grown man off the ground with one hand and strangling him with the other. "You can't expect everyone to abide by your own scruples, my dear Ororo, particularly when chastising a wretch so manifestly unfit to live."

Arnie lost his grip on the .357, which fell and splashed in a puddle. His face was red, his eyes bulged, and tiny, choking noises escaped from his throat.

"Please," Ororo repeated, "for my sake. He . . . he said he believed that I've been hurting people."

The stranger rolled his dark eyes. "Very well, my dear one. For you." He dropped Arnie on the ground, where the would-be mutant killer lay shaking and wheezing. His attacker's long, pointed nails had sliced his neck. "Go, and don't ever let me see your face again." When the human didn't spring into motion immediately, he gave him a brutal kick in the ribs. "Run, cur!"

Arnie sobbed, dragged himself to his feet, and staggered away. The cloaked man turned his back on him at once, as if he'd ceased to exist.

All courtly gentleness now, the newcomer offered Ororo his hand and lifted her to her feet. His touch was startlingly cold. Probably the rain had chilled his flesh.

"Thank you," she said. "For rescuing me, and for sparing him."

He smiled at her. "I never anticipated finding you here, although considering what's transpiring, perhaps I should have. You're fortunate that I noticed the mob shooting and scurrying about, and flew lower to investigate. I must confess, I wouldn't have expected such courteous words from you, despite the circumstances of our meeting."

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"I don't know what you mean by that." She smiled ruefully. "I don't know a lot of things. Something's wrong with my memory. But you called me by name. You know me."

"Of course." His dark eyes gazed down at her, studying her face. "But you no longer know me."

"No, I'm sorry. I don't remember much of anything after my days in Africa."

"Then an introduction is in order." He was still holding her hand, and now he raised it to his lips, which proved to be just as icy cold as his fingers. "My name is Vlad, and as always, my beautiful windrider, I am at your service."

"That man—Arnie—said that you're a mutant too."

Vlad grimaced. "About that, as so much else, Arnie is mistaken." He led her toward the shelter of the school building's doorway. "I am the king of another mighty race, of a realm that exists in secret alongside the nations that common people know. Years ago, I met you, loved you, and asked you to be my queen, but . . . circumstances tore us apart. Afterwards I lay incapacitated for a long time. I imagine you even believed me dead." They stepped up onto a concrete porch and into the close quarters of the doorway. Ororo was grateful to escape the rain. "Do you truly not remember any of this?"

Feeling vaguely ashamed of her ignorance, Ororo shook her head. "No. I hope that doesn't hurt you. After you saved my life, that's the last thing I want."

He smiled sardonically. "It's scarcely a tonic for my pride, but I'm sure you'll recall everything in time, as you recover from what ails you. Speaking of which, do you know what that is?"

She shook her head. "Not really."

"Well, I can venture a guess," the tall man said. "As I said, we've been separated for a long while, so I'm ignorant of your recent history. I can't tell you how you came to the United States, or to Natchez in particular."

"I came to stop the rain. I do remember that."

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His eyes narrowed as if in annoyance. She sensed that he didn't much like being interrupted by anyone, even a woman for whom he professed affection. But the next instant, his smile returned. "Ah. Well, what you may not have realized is that a mutual enemy of ours, a sorcerer called Belasco—" She tensed. "I see the name means something to you."

"Yes. I don't truly remember who he is or what he's done, but I know it was cruel and terrible."

"Indeed. He conjured this rain, but even that is the least of his mischief. He presently poses a threat to the entire world, which is why I came here to deal with him. I suspect that when you tried to disrupt his schemes, he attacked you and made you as you are now."

"Maybe," Ororo said. "I do think that *someone* attacked me."

"Then there you have it," said Vlad. "My dear one, I wish I could spend the whole night talking with you, reminiscing and reminding you of who you are, but sadly, time is of the essence. I must find you a safe refuge where you can complete your recovery, then track down the warlock before his plans come to fruition. But I couldn't bear to move on without making certain you understand that I still adore you." His rich, compelling voice throbbed with the force of his desire. "I still yearn for the union that an unkind fate once denied us. I understand that your mind is jumbled, but surely, when you look into my face, you feel some stirring of the love we shared."

His dark eyes shone in the gloom. For a moment, no doubt due to a trick of the light or her own exhaustion, they almost seemed to glitter red. Her head swam, and then powerful emotions and vague half memories welled up inside her. She had loved him once, in a way she'd loved no one else, so passionately that it was somehow frightening, so devotedly that her entire existence had revolved around him. His touch had filled her with a strange ecstasy that she'd never felt before or since.

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Her expression must have revealed that she was remembering, because he opened his arms, spreading the folds of his cloak and revealing a cravat, ruffled shirt, waistcoat, and frock coat just as antiquated as his outerwear. Ororo stepped into his embrace.

Kurt dropped toward a black expanse of water. As best he could judge, it had originally been a pond in the center of a small public park, but now, swollen with rain, it had overflowed its banks to engulf the surrounding area. Trees, benches, barbecue grills, swing sets, a jungle gym, seesaws, and, beyond the borders of the submerged field, parking meters protruded from the flood.

After battling outside the *Midnight Runner*, the mutant was already wet, but even so, he saw no reason to immerse himself in a muddy lake. He waited until he saw just a few yards above the surface, then released the harness of his parachute and teleported out of it to the sloped roof of a nearby furniture store.

He shed the impetus of his descent with a somersault across the rough wet shingles and flipped nimbly to his feet. Peering about, trying to get his bearings, he wiped the stinking, luminous ichor off his saber onto the edge of his red, V-shaped tabard and, with the ease of long practice, returned the weapon to the scabbard on his back.

He saw no sign of his friends or Dracula in the immediate vicinity, not that he'd expected to. Given the *Runner's* velocity, and their disparate methods of escaping the doomed jet, his teammates could well be scattered across a number of miles. He pulled up the white, scarlet-trimmed cuff of his right gauntlet and activated the wrist radio underneath.

"Amanda," he said. "Shadowcat. Colossus." He supposed he should have thought to provide Dracula with one of the devices as well, but it was too late to worry about that now. "This is Nightcrawler. Come in, please."

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Overhead, lightning flared. The radio crackled with static, but failed to produce any voices.

Kurt scowled. Why didn't the others respond? Perhaps the storm was somehow responsible.

Whatever the problem was, he'd evidently have to find his comrades the hard way. He set off running across the rooftops, bounding from one to the next. His trained acrobat's balance and mutant clinging power kept him from slipping, even on the slick surfaces produced by the rain, just as his powerful legs managed the leaps without difficulty. Periodically he teleported a few hundred feet, so as to cover more ground.

After a time, he noticed a snapping sound. His intuition told him that it might have been going on for awhile, but until that moment, his ears hadn't been able to separate it from the hiss and clatter of the downpour. Crouching atop the gabled rooftop of an old house with the boughs of an ancient elm tree looming over him, he strained to hear it more clearly. When it came again, he was able both to discern that it was coming from somewhere off to his left and to identify it as gunfire.

He smiled grimly. If someone was shooting at someone else, it was a good bet that one or more of his comrades were involved somehow. He chose a destination, the top of another tall tree down the street, and willed himself there.

Hugging Vlad was like holding a pillar of granite, as if the tall man had no body heat at all. Up close, he had a faint putrid odor.

But neither the cold nor the smell repulsed Ororo. Feeling lightheaded with the desire that had suddenly come upon her, she lifted her face.

To her surprise, her rescuer didn't press his lips to hers. Instead, moving slowly, evidently savoring the moment, he inclined his head to the side to kiss her on the neck.

For some reason, his action sent a thrill of terror jangling down her nerves. Instinctively she drew upon her power, and

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a jolt of crackling electricity leaped from her body to his. Startled, he flinched, and she twisted from his grasp, retreating back into the wind and the rain.

"I'm sorry!" she said, chagrined by her inexplicably violent reaction yet somehow trusting it nonetheless. "I can't, not now, not yet. Perhaps once I remember—" Her words caught in her throat as she saw his tender, lover's expression melted into the rapacious stare of a lion closing in on a crippled gazelle.

"Oh, yes, you can, my angel," he said. "You can and you will. It's time to embrace your destiny and rule the night at my side. I didn't want to woo you roughly, but I will if necessary. You'll thank me once you ascend to your new estate." He glided after her, eyes crimson, fangs bared.

When she saw the gleaming fangs, she knew him at last. He was Dracula, the monarch of the living dead. Years ago, she'd had the extreme misfortune to kindle what passed for love in his satanic heart, with the result that he'd striven to transform her into a soulless, murdering monster like himself.

Retreating, she hurled a dazzling bolt of electricity. It rocked the vampire back a pace, but then he kept coming. She tried again, only to find that, though sparks popped and flashed around her fingers, her power lacked the strength for another discharge.

Grimly, knowing just how strong and resistant to harm he was, she dropped into a fighting stance, feet at right angles, fists raised. The instant he strode into range, she launched an attack, simultaneously kicking his knee and punching at his throat.

Dracula didn't even bother attempting to block or evade her blows, nor did there appear to be any reason why he should have. Her attacks didn't even make him break stride or shift his balance. His cold, white hands shot out and grabbed her by the shoulders.

Twisting, kneeling, kicking, and stamping, throwing elbow

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strikes and gouging, she used every trick she knew to break free of his grasp, all to no avail. "I love you," he said, shifting around to embrace her from behind. "I've loved you since the moment I saw you." The tips of his fangs indented her skin.

"Let her go!" cried a familiar voice.

Surprised, Dracula turned his head, and Ororo did the same. Crouching only a few feet away, but still somewhat indistinct in the darkness, was a dark goblinlike figure with pointed ears and lambent yellow eyes. A saber hung on his back, and some sort of phosphorescent amber stains glowed on the edge of his tabard.

It was her friend Kurt. He and she were fellow X-Men. The rest of her memories cascaded back into her head.

"Stand back, Wagner," Dracula said. "Ororo is mine now." Storm raked her heel down the vampire's shin, stomped on his foot, then tried to grab his little finger and break it. She might as well have been attacking a solid steel statue.

"No, she isn't," Nightcrawler said, his tail lashing sinuously back and forth. "You swore an oath that you'd behave as a loyal comrade."

"A loyal comrade to you, Rasputin, Miss Sefton, and young Miss Pryde. Not to anyone else." He smiled mockingly. "If you wanted me to promise that I wouldn't lift my hand to *any* X-Man, you should have said so."

"I guess I missed a trick," said Kurt. "Fortunately, from time to time I remember one as well. For instance, back on Muir Island, I remembered that if I had to work with you, it would be wise to carry one of these." He slipped one three-fingered hand inside his tabard and whipped out a small crucifix.

Hissing, Dracula flinched, and Ororo finally managed to wrench herself from his grasp. Kurt stalked forward, the cross upraised, and the vampire retreated, keeping his face averted as if he were trying to avoid looking at a light source as bright as the sun.

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"It seems that my faith has more power left than you supposed, *vampyr*," the Bavarian mutant said, a grim satisfaction in his voice.

Dracula snarled, "Put the vile thing away!"

"Is the promise you gave me still in force?"

"Yes."

"And do you now extend that promise to encompass Storm and any other X-Men we encounter?"

"Yes."

"Very well." Kurt returned the crucifix to its place of concealment. Ororo tensed, but Dracula didn't pounce. He merely turned and gazed at her with such naked, frustrated yearning that for a moment she could almost believe that the passion he felt for her might be somehow akin to human love after all.

Kurt strode to her side. "Are you all right?"

"Relatively," she said, keeping a wary eye on the vampire. "I'm still recovering from an energy drain, and from a lot of general wear and tear since. But he didn't bite me. What is this, Kurt? Is Excalibur really working with Dracula now?"

"For the moment," the indigo-furred mutant replied, "we have to. He got us involved in this matter in the first place. We wouldn't even have known that Belasco is in Natchez if it wasn't for him."

"Then that is true?" Storm asked.

"You wound me," said Dracula, mockery in his voice, his expression composed and arrogant once again. "Would I lie to the woman I love about such a thing?"

"You lied when you claimed you didn't know why I left Africa," she retorted.

He leered. "My sweet, naïve young lady, any gallant will bend the truth a hair to accomplish a seduction. You'll back me up on that, won't you, Wagner?"

Kurt ignored him. "We've actually spoken with Belasco," he said to Ororo. "While we—Amanda, Kitty, Piotr, Dracula,

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and myself—were flying here, he appeared to us in astral form. He boasted that he's figured out a way to bring his *verdammt* Elder Gods back to Earth this very night, then sent a monster that essentially demolished the *Midnight Runner* before we dealt with it. We ditched, and now we're scattered across the city. We have to reassemble quickly and then find Belasco. Do you feel up to helping us? We need you desperately."

Storm hesitated. "I remember how to use my powers now, and a meal, some aspirin for my ankle and the bump on my head, and a few minutes sitting down might go a long way toward restoring my strength. But . . ."

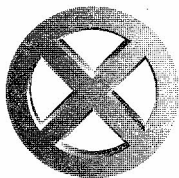
"I suppose that when Dracula stumbled across you in your weakened condition, the temptation to attack you was irresistible. But now that he's given his word to leave you alone, I think he'll keep it. He wants to stop Belasco as much as we do."

"How well you understand me," the vampire said ironically.

"I'm not afraid to work with Dracula," said Ororo to Nightcrawler. "Not with you and the others to watch my back, anyway. But I came here to prevent a flood. And then there's Rogue. Something has happened to her."

"I assure you," Dracula said, "that all your problems stem from Belasco, and that the only way to solve them is to attack them at their source."

Storm grimaced. She could scarcely deny that up to now, she hadn't had any luck altering the weather system threatening Natchez by employing her usual methods. "Very well, Kurt, count me in."



CHAPTER 11



When they'd agreed to stop and eat—which was about the only thing all three of them had agreed upon in the last couple hours—Logan had pulled the Blazer under the porte cochere of a defunct Buick dealership. Posters hung behind the glass walls and door to the shadowy, empty display room, advertising a fabulous year-end clearance on all makes and models.

Seated on the hood of the Blazer, Jean munched a ration bar from her belt pack. It was a nutritionally balanced, high-energy food with a fruit-and-honey taste that was better than one might expect. Nevertheless, at some point Wolverine had replaced the bars in his own belt with beef jerky, and now, sitting cross-legged on the pavement with his back against the glass, he was wolfing down a slab of the dark, dried meat with one hand and smoking a cheroot with the other.

Meanwhile, Scott was in the back of the car with the dome light on and his tool kit laid out on the seat beside him, checking out the mechanisms of his visor and glove controls. Since the devices had failed him in the carriage company's stable, he'd become almost obsessive-compulsive about tinkering with them at every opportunity. Despite his customary perfectionism and meticulous attention to detail, that wasn't like him, and it worried Jean. But she hesitated to say so for fear that she'd only upset him.

Just let us get through this nightmare, she thought. Scott would be all right, they'd all be all right, once they'd finally had a chance to rest.

Swallowing the last bite of her meal, she slid off the nose of the Blazer. "I might as well try another scan from here," she said.

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"Go for it," said Wolverine.

As she stepped from beneath the overhang into the hissing, clattering rain, she reflected that she'd acquired her own neurotic tic on this mission. She knew it shouldn't make any difference to the potency of her telepathy whether she was standing under a roof or the open sky, but suddenly, it felt as if it did, and it seemed better to capitulate to the feeling than to fight it and risk letting it throw her off her game.

Her perceptions of her immediate surroundings grew vaguer as she sent her awareness sweeping across the area, sifting through the signature impressions of countless minds, nearly all of them seething with anxiety, for the distinctive patterns of Rogue and Ororo.

Nothing. She did her best to quash a surge of frustration so bitter it verged on despair, reminding herself that the objects of her search could fly, and she had yet to scan the air above the city. Reflexively lifting her head as if it were necessary to peer skyward with her eyes, allowing the rain to pummel her face, she reached back and forth and up and up and up.

At least the sky wasn't cacophonous with the mental babble of thousands of people. She no longer felt that she was attempting the psi equivalent of determining where Waldo was. Her mind brushed the thoughts of two SAFE agents patrolling in a hovercraft. One was wishing she was home in bed with her new husband. The other wondered if the guy who brought Rogue down would receive a commendation, or possibly even a promotion.

Jean left them to their musings, encountered the thoughts of another pair of agents, and moved on once more. Then her telepathic gaze fell on the mind of someone who was alone.

It wasn't Rogue or Ororo, but it was a woman she knew well. Indeed, she'd once established a psychic bond with her, just as she did with all the X-Men, and although she hadn't activated that link in quite awhile, it now automatically thrilled to life. In her mind, Jean saw a slim, brown-haired young

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woman running down a slope of air with the wind and pounding raindrops passing harmlessly through her body. The phantom broke stride when she felt the mental contact.

Jean? she said mind to mind, as the Professor had taught her.

At the same time, Scott and Logan hurried up to Jean. No doubt her husband had sensed her sudden excitement over their own special link, while the short man had observed a change in her body language.

“Which one did you find?” Cyclops asked.

“Neither of them. It’s Shadowcat. She’s overhead.” At the same time, Jean broadcast the telepathic message, *Yes, Kitty, it’s me. Scott and Logan are with me.*

“Kitty?” said Logan, water dripping from the rim of his Stetson. “What’s she doin’ here?”

“I don’t know yet,” Jean replied tersely. “I’ll tell you when I find out. Please be quiet.” Nontelepaths didn’t realize that trying to communicate orally with one person and psychically with another was as annoying as attempting to carry on two ordinary conversations, one face-to-face and one on the phone, simultaneously.

This is great! Shadowcat enthused. *Where are you?*

On the ground, about a quarter mile to the southeast from you. I’ll guide you in.

No, Kitty said, pivoting and beginning to jog once more. I mean, not yet. Some of Excalibur is in town, too. Petey, Kurt, and Amanda. Reach out and touch them and get them heading in your direction.

Will do, Phoenix said. With luck, it will be fairly easy to find them now that I know to look. I’m very glad you and your team are here, Kitty. We have serious problems.

I know, Shadowcat replied. Or at least I do if we’re both talking about the same stuff. She hesitated, and Jean detected a thread of anxiety running through the younger woman’s

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thoughts. *I hope you'll still be glad to see us when you find out who we brought along. Is Ororo anywhere around?*

Piotr stepped into the cramped, shadowy space between two buildings. His massive, towering frame and reflective skin were less than ideal for sneaking about, but, splashing up filthy water, the Army Hummer rolled on by without stopping.

When she'd made telepathic contact with him, Jean had warned him that, traveling on foot as he was, he should make his way to her location inconspicuously. Evidently the X-Men had run afoul of the authorities yet again, a fact that made his stomach churn in frustration. With Belasco's scheme nearing completion, it was a complication he and his comrades definitely didn't need.

He skulked on, and after another minute, the failed car dealership that Phoenix had told him to look for emerged from the veils of rain. A point of orange light, probably the tip of one of Logan's cigars, shone beneath the porte cochere. As Piotr strode toward it, he abruptly felt an unanticipated reluctance.

He faltered, and then the slender, yellow-clad form of Amanda popped into view beneath the overhang. Jean immediately gave the other woman a hug. Piotr sighed.

"I always said you didn't have enough sense to come in out of the rain," said a teasing female voice from overhead. Colossus looked up to see Kitty standing on the edge of a roof about ten feet up. "Why are you hanging back here? Don't you feel like a family reunion?"

"I do," he said, "but perhaps the family does not want a reunion with this particular black sheep. Remember, my situation is different than yours. You and Kurt only left the X-Men when you thought everyone else was dead. I quit to join Magneto's Acolytes."

Kitty scowled. "Give me a break. You had your reasons, and anyway, it's ancient history. Nobody cares about it any-

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more. You've got to stop listening to Drac's nasty little digs. It's not like the creep has your best interests at heart."

"Perhaps not, but that doesn't mean there was no truth in what he said."

"Just let it go, will you? Even if somebody was mad at you, what matters now is stopping Belasco, right?"

Piotr's muscles tightened. "*Da*. Absolutely."

"Then let's hook up with the others and get back to work."

She jumped to the ground, her knees flexing to absorb the shock of the fall, landing with the agility that her martial arts training had given her. She squeezed his forearm and then they walked on.

When Colossus and Kitty appeared, Logan felt disgusted with himself. Despite the darkness and the drumming rain, he should have spotted them before they got so close, especially since the metal man had some kind of phosphorescent yellow stains all over his uniform. Scowling, he stepped forward to greet them.

He offered Piotr his hand, and, although he had big hands for a man of his height, saw it more or less lost inside the giant Russian's steely grasp. "*Rasputin*," he said, and the other man's eyes narrowed, almost as if he were flinching. Apparently he didn't like something about his former teammate's greeting. Logan felt a pang of annoyance. It really was ridiculous that a guy roughly the size of a Kodiak bear had feelings that got themselves hurt so easily.

Logan extricated his fingers from Piotr's grip, turned, and gave Kitty an avuncular hug. For a moment the distemper that had gnawed at him all day gave way to warmth. "Good to see ya, kiddo," he murmured.

"Ditto," she whispered back, "even though you just made a liar out of me by being so brusque and cold with Petey."

The Canadian grimaced. "Everybody's after me to spruce up my manners today."

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"Level with me," Kitty said, stepping back, the better to look him in the face. Even though she was all grown up now, she was still only an inch taller than he was, and it was easy for her to make eye contact. "What's wrong? Don't you want us here?"

"I do, except that after what Jeannie passed on to me, I'm worried about trusting your judgment. What the hell were you thinkin'—" He broke off his remark when Ororo, Kurt, and Dracula emerged from the curtains of hissing rain.

Storm was limping, and missing her cape and bracelets, which would certainly explain why her teammates hadn't managed to reach her via Comm-Stat. She looked as if she'd gone swimming in muddy water—which, based on what Rogue said, she probably had. Like Piotr, Nightcrawler had shining amber smears on his uniform, although not nearly as many. He was walking between the black woman and Dracula, keeping them separated. The vampire was his usual composed, arrogant self. He looked like he was sauntering into a meeting of the Dracula fan club, not an assembly of the enemies who'd once staked him through the heart.

"Forget it," said Logan to Kitty. "I shouldn't be reamin' you, Amanda, or the Russkie out when it wasn't your call. My beef is with your boss."

He strode toward Ororo, even gladder to see her alive than he had been to lay eyes on Kitty, but still angry about everything else. Jean reached the windrider a step ahead of him and threw her arms around her. "We were so afraid you were dead," Phoenix said. "Rogue said she killed you."

"Not quite," said Ororo. "You've seen her, then."

"Yes," said Cyclops glumly, "but unfortunately she got away from us. She's still as confused as she must have been when she attacked you."

"I scanned and scanned," said Jean to Storm, "but I couldn't find you. Even now I'm having difficulty perceiving your mind. It's as if someone wrapped you in a psi shield."

"The important thing," said Wolverine, "is, are you okay?"

She gave him a smile that, haggard and bedraggled as she was, made her face as ethereally beautiful as ever. "I'd like a bite to eat, a little first aid, and to sit down for a few minutes. Then I'll be ready for duty."

"Take all the time you need," Logan said. "We've got a little business to take care of anyway." His claws whispering from the sockets on the backs of his gloves, he pivoted toward Dracula.

"Wolverine!" Kurt snapped. "Dracula is our ally for the duration of the mission."

"Are you crazy?" Logan replied. "He's a monster, a mass murderer, and hell-bent on turning Storm into a bloodsucker like himself." Nightcrawler's mouth tightened, and somehow that flicker of expression conveyed an ugly truth. "He's tried to do it tonight already, hasn't he?"

"Yes," Kurt admitted, "but he's given his pledge not to do it again."

"Oh, well," said Logan sarcastically, "in that case, excuse me for even bringing it up. If we can't trust Dracula's promise—"

"We trust it because we have to," Colossus said, moving up behind Wolverine as though positioning himself to restrain the smaller man if necessary. "We wouldn't even have known to come to Natchez if not for him. Besides, he's already shown us that he's as committed to stopping Belasco as we are."

The sorcerer's name was enough to make even Logan hesitate. "Belasco? He's involved in this?" The last time Wolverine had seen the magician, Belasco had been tumbling into an extradimensional vortex and the clutches of the demonic race called the N'Garai. Much as Wolverine loathed those particular otherworldly horrors, on that occasion he'd been more than happy to wish them bon appetit. "What does it take to kill that scumball?"

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"My friend," said Ororo, "thank you for trying to protect me. But I've already accepted the fact that this once, we must work with one devil to thwart another, and I ask you to do the same. Otherwise Belasco may finally succeed in unleashing his Elder Gods upon the Earth."

Smiling a poisonous smile, Dracula extended his pallid hand to Logan. "Comrade," he said.

The Canadian glared up into the cloaked monster's crimson eyes. "I'll be watchin' you, leech. You even think about screwing us over, and I'm gonna finish the job we should have finished in England."

Dracula sneered. "My ill-bred, swaggering little savage, I invite you to try."

"Enough," said Scott, beads of rain on his massive red glasses, his trenchcoat flapping in the wind. "The issue is settled, and we have more important things to do than threaten one another. We need to pool our information, then figure out our next move."

Dracula inclined his head. "You're quite right, Summers. The bluster can wait. Since it was I who discovered that Belasco has returned to Earth, allow me to share my knowledge first. Some time ago, I founded a coven of my progeny here in Natchez. . . ."

The vampire, Ororo, and Jean all spoke in turn, concisely and coherently, contributing pieces to the puzzle. Logan listened to it all with a growing sense of apprehension.

"I infer," said Dracula when Phoenix concluded her story, "that Belasco generated the storm to lure this Rogue of yours to Natchez. Upon her arrival, he transformed her by inducing her to absorb the essence of one of my brood, possibly rendered more virulent by his magic. Knowing that her fellow X-Men would come looking for her, he also cast spells to make her—and incidentally Ororo, who, assuming she survived the altered Rogue's attentions, could serve as a source of infor-

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mation—relatively invisible to telepathy. The object was to hinder your search while he drew Rogue into his presence.”

“Makes sense,” Cyclops said. “But there’s still plenty we don’t understand. Even if she herself wants to hurt people, why is Rogue claiming that the X-Men as a whole have declared war on the city? Just because she’s demented? And more importantly, what does Belasco want with her? She must figure in to his plans to bring the Dark Ones back into the world, but how?”

“Many rituals of high magic involve a balance of male and female elements,” said Amanda.

“And Belasco has repeatedly incorporated female victims into his schemes,” said Storm, sitting on the pavement and munching a ration bar. “First, Beatrice dei Portinari—at least if you can believe that medieval ship’s log Ka-Zar found—then our friend Shanna, and finally Illyana. Still, Scott’s question is a good one. Why choose Rogue? Surely it would have been easier simply to abduct a woman with no mutant abilities.”

“He picked Illyana because she had the potential to become a sorceress,” said Amanda, “but I’ve never detected any trace of magical ability in Rogue.”

“Maybe it was to spite us,” said Logan, sucking the pleasant burn of tobacco smoke into his lungs. “Not only does he bring the Dark Ones back, he uses one of our own teammates to do it. Anyway, who cares why? If we can get to her—or him—in time, the reason won’t matter. So how do we do that?”

Kurt turned toward Amanda. “On board the *Runner*,” he said, “before the monster attacked, I suspected that you were trying to divine the location of Belasco’s physical body.”

The blonde sorceress grimaced. “I was, but it didn’t work. He’s shielded himself.”

Dracula sneered. “Pathetic.” Amanda flushed.

“Can you do any better?” demanded Wolverine.

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"I had hoped to trace Belasco through one of the vampires he's placed under his control," said the creature in the high-collared cloak. "Unfortunately, it now appears that will not be possible."

"Then explain to me why it is that we need you. Or better yet, just shut up."

"Both of you put a lid on it," Cyclops said, evoking a fresh surge of anger from Logan. Summers just wouldn't stop riding him, even when he was sticking up for one of their own. "If you haven't got something useful to contribute, don't say anything. Nightcrawler, I don't suppose that any of your team brought a mini-Cerebro?"

"We did," the indigo-furred mutant said, "but it went down with the *Runner*. At that point we didn't know we'd have any use for it, so we didn't bother to save it."

"Then Phoenix and Amanda will just have to keep scanning with their powers," said Scott. "Storm, Shadowcat, and Dracula will look for Rogue from the air. The rest of us will search as best we can on the ground. With luck, one of us will turn up something."

Logan suspected it would take a lot of luck, but didn't see much point in saying so. He did, however, have another issue to address. "There's somethin' else we'd better talk about. How do we handle Rogue if we do find her?"

Obviously puzzled, Nightcrawler cocked his head. "Try to persuade her to surrender herself into our custody, I assume. Subdue her if we fail to convince her."

"Sounds good," Logan said, "except, what if we can't do either of those things? She already mopped up the floor with Cyke, Jeannie, and me."

"I know she's immensely powerful," said Kurt, "but we're powerful too."

"There speaks the brilliant mind that saddled us with Dracula," Logan said. "You're only powerful until she touches you, elf. Then you're out cold on the ground, and she has your

power to turn against the rest of us. And in the state she's in, she'll be more'n happy to do it."

"What are you saying?" Kitty asked. "That all nine of us working together can't beat her?"

"No," Logan answered. "I'm sayin' that last time I held back because she's my friend. I'm sure Cyke and Jean did too. And it didn't work. We may find that it won't work the next time around, either. We may have to go all out and run the risk of killing her."

Shocked, the others simply stared at him for a moment. Their stunned reaction irked him. "You don't mean that," said Storm at last.

"I don't want to mean it," Logan said. "I feel bad for Rogue. I understand what she's goin' through better than any of you." He had problems with his own memory. At some point in his past, a master brainwasher had tampered with his mind, erasing some memories and possibly even implanting false ones. And of course he was thoroughly familiar with the urge to kill. "But the whole world's on the table. We have to be willing to do whatever it takes to preserve it."

"Not if it means killing a teammate," the windrider said. "Not if it means killing *anyone*. There has to be a better way."

"There is," said Colossus, "find her and let her lead us to Belasco."

"Maybe she'd shake us off her tail," Wolverine said. "Or maybe all he has to do is look her in the eyes and say, 'Presto,' to let the Dark Ones out of their cage. We can't risk letting her get to him as long as we have a choice."

"But it's not as if she's a complete monster," said Kitty.

"Tell that to the civilians she's been slaughterin'."

"But . . . at least she held back from hurting you, Scott, and Jean."

"That was hours ago, and we have to assume the poison inside her's been eating away at what was left of the real

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Rogue ever since. She could easily be a complete monster by now, with no trace of her old self left to revive, even if we knew how."

Cyclops turned toward Amanda. "Evidently," he said, "what's happened to Rogue is partly magical. If you got close to her, could you undo it?"

"Break one of Belasco's spells?" said Dracula. "Unlikely, not with the puny magic she currently wields."

"I didn't ask you," said Scott.

"I could try," said Amanda, self-doubt and perhaps even a hint of shame in her voice, "but he's right. It might be very difficult."

Scott looked at his wife. "Could you use your telepathy to help Rogue recover her sanity?"

Jean shook her head. "I suppose that theoretically, it's possible, but frankly, I doubt it. Rogue has always been difficult to reach telepathically, and the situation is far worse now that she's taken on what amounts to a psychic parasite. I could barely even probe her when we found her before."

"Then . . ." Scott hesitated, as if summoning up the will-power for an unpleasant task. "Then I'm afraid Wolverine has a point. If worst comes to worst, we might have to use maximum force against Rogue without worrying about the potential effect on her."

"Oh, Scott," said Ororo, "not you too."

"The X-Men's mission is to defend ordinary humans against dangerous mutants," Cyclops said. "Any dangerous mutants."

"This debate is puerile," Dracula declared. "We are warriors, and warriors kill without compunction when that is the most efficacious way to achieve their ends. Surely even you X-Men with all your absurd pretensions to virtue comprehend that much."

Great, thought Logan sourly, first Summers and now Dracula come down on my side. Considering the rancor he felt

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for them, their support actually annoyed him, but failed to shake his conviction that he was right.

"When I became Dark Phoenix," said Jean slowly, her lovely face troubled, "or rather, when the entity that took my place did, she sacrificed her life to keep herself from destroying the world. I . . . I think that if it comes down to it, Rogue, the *real* Rogue, would want us to help her do the same."

"I say that we must not allow it to 'come down to it,'" Piotr said. "We must find Belasco, and deal with our problems at the source."

Logan gave him a contemptuous glower. Was Piotr's head solid steel all the way through? Hadn't he understood that they didn't know how to find Belasco? "Yeah, well, too bad deserters don't get a vote."

Colossus actually rocked backward, as if someone as inhumanly powerful as himself had slapped him. Then his features twisted into a snarl. "Better a deserter than a bloodthirsty animal. For all your pose of reluctance, I imagine you're actually hoping for a chance to rip Rogue apart."

"Not Rogue, *Acolyte*. But I've got to admit, slicing and dicing your tin-plated butt would be a treat." He stalked forward, and, fists clenching, Colossus moved to meet him.

A beam of scarlet energy blazed forth and pulverized the patch of pavement between them. Flying bits of concrete stung Logan's legs. "Knock it off!" Cyclops barked.

Glaring at Piotr, Logan growled, "Later." The Russian responded with a nod.

"That's enough, people," said Scott. "I'm making a command decision. If I give the order, we'll use maximum force against Rogue. Is that understood?"

"It's understood," said Ororo, "but it's unacceptable." No one had gotten around to bandaging her injured ankle yet, but she dragged herself to her feet anyway, putting herself on the same level with Cyclops.

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Scott sighed. "We know you're squeamish. No one expects *you* to strike a mortal blow."

"Thank you," the white-haired woman said coldly, "but that's not good enough. The mission must not proceed with this odious plan in effect."

"Yes, it will," said Cyclops, "I'm field commander, and it's my call."

"No, it is not," Storm replied. "I'm a team leader too. I conceived the idea of a mission to Natchez, and I was on the ground before you. I'm in charge."

"Ordinarily," said Scott, "that argument might hold water. But by your own admission, Rogue's attack scrambled your mind, and judging from the way you're acting, I'd say you're still not thinking clearly. It would be irresponsible for me to let you lead."

"You're both overlooking something," Nightcrawler said. "I'm the leader of Excalibur, and my team will follow my orders. Even if that means operating on our own, along with any X-Men who care to join us."

Kitty watched the argument develop with an ever-increasing sense of bewilderment and horror. She'd known the X-Men to argue vehemently on many occasions, but this time it was different. There was an almost hysterical edge to the bickering, a pettiness and vindictiveness that were new.

She could scarcely believe that Logan and Piotr had nearly come to blows. Or that Scott had fired an optic blast simply to keep them in line. Ordinarily he would have done it with that whip-crack tone of command he could assume at will.

It was even more astonishing that Jean, one of the most loyal, compassionate people Kitty knew, had accepted the idea of killing Rogue so easily. Just as it was amazing to see three mature, generous, self-confident individuals like Scott, Ororo, and Kurt squabbling like jealous, insecure kids over who would lead the mission.

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And now it appeared that the group might even be on the verge of splitting up, when any idiot could see that their only hope of defeating Belasco lay in sticking together. Unable to contain herself any longer, she screamed, "Stop it!"

Evidently her outburst caught everyone by surprise, because, startled, they all fell silent and turned to gawk at her.

"What's the matter with you?" she demanded. "This isn't the X-Men I remember. We were a family! You're acting like you hate each other!"

The anger in her friends' faces and tense postures gave way to consternation and shame. She could see the change even in Logan's gruff, tough demeanor. In a flash of insight, it occurred to Kitty that if their incarnation of the X-Men, the team Professor Xavier had formed after the majority of his original students departed, had been a family, then she, a teenager years younger than any of the others, had been everybody's surrogate kid sister. She was an adult now, of course, but on some unconscious level, perhaps the others still regarded her as a kid. Maybe they were chagrined that they'd quarreled in front of her and upset her. In which case, it was possible that her outrage had jolted them to their senses when no one else's could.

"I apologize," said Scott heavily. "To all of you. I've been edgy and morose all day. I keep trying to snap myself out of it, but I always slip back."

"I feel the same way," said Jean. She looked at the members of Excalibur. "We've seen some difficult duty lately. Our nerves are raw."

"I wonder if that's really the problem," said Amanda, her forehead furrowed with thought. "I've seen you worn out and facing difficult problems before. It doesn't usually set you against one another. To the contrary. It pulls you together."

"Then what is wrong?" Logan asked.

"I have a guess," the Gypsy said. "Let me check it out."

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Breathing slowly and deeply, inhaling through her nose and exhaling through her mouth, Amanda sharpened her powers of perception. Warmth flowed up the center of her body, sparking the energy centers—what Eastern mystics called *chakras*—to tingling life. The auras of her companions shimmered into view.

Thin strands of a dark, poisonous vermilion coiled through the haloes of all the mutants, like loops of webbing some monstrous spider would use to bind its prey. Only Dracula's shadowy aura, filthy with his own innate corruption, was free of the taint.

"It's there," she said.

"What?" Cyclops asked.

"Something else Belasco did to help keep you from finding Rogue," Amanda replied. "He's put a curse on you. A subtle one to make you irritable and apprehensive, cloud your judgment, and give you bad luck."

"Like makin' our gear break down?" asked Wolverine, exhaling a pungent blue cloud of smoke. "So far we've had trouble with the Cerebros, the Citation, and Cyke's visor. Half the time I can't even get a match to light."

"You can add the GCS system to that list," Kitty said. "We tried to radio you from the *Runner*."

"Yes," Amanda said. "The spell could very easily do that. It's also contagious. Once we all got together, the effect spread to Kurt, Piotr, and Kitty. They were X-Men once, and evidently, as far as the magic is concerned, they still are."

"Far as we're concerned, too," Logan rumbled. He turned toward Shadowcat. "Glad the whammy didn't mess with your head as much as it did with everybody else's."

Kitty grinned. "Well, it makes sense. I always thought that I was the only noncrazy person in this outfit."

"Can you lift the curse?" said Scott to Amanda.

"Precisely because it is such a subtle spell," the sorceress replied, "Belasco didn't put an enormous amount of force into

it. So perhaps I can." She whirled her hands through an intricate cabalistic pass, then pressed her palms together as if she were shaping a snowball. She visualized an orb of emerald light, the externalized manifestation of her power, swelling in her grasp like a pearl growing in an oyster. In a few moments, actual green radiance spilled from between her fingers.

"By the grace of the Seraphim," she said, "who shield humankind from evil. By the might of Cyttorak, whose power no demon can withstand. Flames of the Faltine, heed my call and burn the taint away."

She raised her arms straight over her head, then whipped her hands apart. The ball of green light exploded into sizzling arcs of lightning, which leaped forth to strike the mutants, not harming them in the slightest but surrounding each of their bodies with a verdant corona.

The discharge of the mystical energy left Amanda momentarily weak. Her knees went rubbery, and she nearly fell. Kurt lunged to her side, caught her by the arm, and supported her.

The green haloes flickered out, and her strength came trickling back. She scrutinized the mutants' auras. The Flames of the Faltine had destroyed most of the vermilion coils, but a few wisps of Belasco's power remained. In all likelihood, they'd fade harmlessly away over the course of the next few hours, but it was also theoretically possible that the threads would grow, the ends fusing and reestablishing the malediction.

"Did you zap the curse away?" Kitty asked.

Amanda hesitated. "I think so."

Dracula shook his head, his almost pitying expression telling her that she was woefully inadequate to the challenges before her. That she'd best embrace the knowledge he had to give her before it was too late, before she failed Kurt, her friends, and the entire human race. Fearful that he was right, she wrenched her eyes away.

"Good," said Wolverine. "I, uh, guess I could apologize

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too. 'Specially to Petey and to you, Cyke. You don't always screw up. Just mostly.'

"You know what's odd," Cyclops replied. "During the time when Belasco's spell was presumably making you irrational and obnoxious, I never noticed any difference."

Logan smiled. "I don't believe it. Was that solemn Scott Summers tryin' to make a *joke*? You better give him another jolt of that green light, Amanda. He still ain't back to his normal self."

"I apologize as well," said Ororo. "Much as it troubles me, I know that on occasion it's necessary for someone on the team to strike with deadly force. Simply promise me that when we find Rogue, you will only do it if there's absolutely no alternative."

"Of course," Cyclops said.

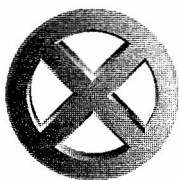
"Then I think you should lead, my friend. In case someone must give the order that I could not."

"That's fine with me as well," Nightcrawler said. "Excalibur is at your disposal."

"Fair enough," said Scott, visibly reassuming the non-sense demeanor he so often presented in the field. "I've already told you the plan, so . . ." He hesitated.

"Got a bright idea?" Logan asked. "We could use one."

"Maybe I do," Cyclops said. "We aren't the only ones chasing Rogue. SAFE is after her too, and they have enough people and the freedom of movement to investigate the scenes of the attacks and interview any surviving witnesses. It's conceivable that they've uncovered information we don't have, and I think it would be smart to go and get it."



CHAPTER 12



Kneeling, peering around the corner of a little concrete block gas station, Kitty studied the National Guard armory across the street. With its perimeter wall and steel gate, the old, sprawling building had no doubt always resembled a fortress, and now that SAFE and the Army had commandeered it for their headquarters, it had become one in truth. Armed soldiers guarded the entrances and stood watch on the roof, while trucks, APCs, and one of the hovercraft sat in the parking lot, the rain drumming on their metal bodies. Pinkish lights burned atop tall posts, illuminating the grounds.

"It looks," said Ororo, peeking over Shadowcat's shoulder, "as if they're afraid that Rogue will attack here." Cyclops had chosen her, Kitty, Logan, and Dracula to infiltrate the command center, on the assumption that a sneak thief, a ninja, a secret agent, and a creature with supernatural powers of stealth ought to be able to slip in and out of the place undetected.

"Maybe that's smart," Logan said. Now that he was headed into action, he'd discarded his cowboy hat and duster and pulled his cowl over his head. "She's crazy enough to try, and maybe powerful enough to get away with it."

"I suggest," said Dracula, "that we examine the other faces of the enclosure. It will likely be easier to approach from another direction."

"Yeah," said Wolverine, pointing. "Let's go that way." In the twinkling of an eye, Dracula dropped to all fours and shifted into the form of an enormous gray wolf. With his head lower to the ground, he'd be harder for anyone to spot, and, at a distance, likely mistaken for a stray dog even if somebody did.

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Taking advantage of every bit of cover, still keeping their distance from the armory's perimeter wall, the four companions skulked through the downpour. Ororo glided along in much the same way that Kitty did. The tricks of stealth she'd learned in Cairo had much in common with ninja techniques. Though Logan too was a master of Japanese martial arts, to Shadowcat's knowledgeable eye, his slinking progress differed from that of the women. It looked more natural, feral, akin to the flowing gait of the huge beast Dracula had become.

There were no gates in the rear wall. Summoning a sudden updraft that tugged at Kitty's tangled, sodden tresses, Ororo bobbed just high enough into the air to peer over the barrier, then instantly dropped back down to earth. "I don't see anyone on this part of the grounds," she said.

"Then we might as well go in this way," Kitty said.

"I agree," said Storm. "Everyone, close your eyes." The younger woman obeyed, and brilliant, strobing radiance shone redly through her eyelids. With luck, the lightning flaring in the sky would dazzle the sentries on the roof.

When the display stopped, the would-be trespassers darted toward a section of wall equidistant between two lights, where it was darkest. Dracula leapt over the barrier. As the wind shrieked, Ororo levitated, gripped Logan's hands, and carried him to the other side. Kitty simply phased through the tiers of bricks and mortar.

Crouching low on the soggy grass, she waited a moment for an alarm to blare or for someone to start shooting. During her career as an X-Man and member of Excalibur, she'd occasionally run afoul of surveillance systems so cunningly designed that it was difficult for any intruder, even a ninja, to defeat or even detect them before they revealed her presence. She doubted that the armory possessed such a system—even if the new occupants wanted one, they'd scarcely had time to install it—but you never knew.

Nothing happened. *So far, so good*, she thought.

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She and her companions crept on toward the armory, from one patch of shadow to the next, more or less directly under the noses of the soldiers on the roof. Trained infiltrator though she was, Kitty found the process nerve-wracking. At that moment she would gladly have traded her phasing power for, say, invisibility like Susan Richards of the Fantastic Four had.

Since that exchange was impossible, she took each step with an absolute economy of movement, grateful that at least she didn't have to worry about her intangible feet raising a telltale splash or squish from the muddy ground. Her senseis had taught her that, though technique was vital, stealth was ultimately achieved through a kind of faith. If she believed that no one could see her, her confidence would lend her body the grace to make that belief a reality. She did her best to embrace that attitude now.

After what felt like an hour but had likely been only a minute, she and the others reached the side of the armory. Solidifying, Kitty permitted herself a sigh of relief. As long as they hugged the wall, the sentries overhead probably wouldn't see them.

"Door," Logan whispered, nodding toward the left. The intruders took another wary look around, then skulked toward the entrance in question.

Unfortunately, a yellow light bulb shone above it. Phasing, Kitty surged from the shadows, into the pool of amber illumination, onto a concrete stoop, and through the substance of the door itself, all in a single second.

On the other side was a narrow, dimly lit hallway with walls in need of painting and a dingy linoleum floor. It looked as if Kitty had invaded a service area, where no one but the maintenance staff would ordinarily come. She opened the door and her companions instantly lunged through. Dracula returned to human form, his muzzle sinking back into his skull, his ashen fur lightening into bone-white skin or darkening into

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funereal garments, the toes on his forepaws lengthening into fingers.

The intruders stalked on toward the front of the armory, toward brighter illumination and the echo of voices and footsteps. Kitty tried not to dwell on the fact that, now that they were sneaking through the confines of an occupied, well-lit building, their risk of being discovered had increased enormously. Water dripped from their soaked hair and garments, but some application of Ororo's power dried it as it fell and kept them from leaving a trail.

They peeked into one area after another, searching for something that appeared to be a repository of information. Then Logan halted and gave the hand signal that meant, *take cover*.

The next moment, Kitty heard what he'd heard, or possibly smelled. People were proceeding down the intersecting hallway up ahead. Becoming intangible, she stepped into a wall, with only her eyes sticking out to observe what happened next. Logan, Storm, and Dracula hid in doorways.

Half a dozen fit-looking, crewcut men in combat boots and mottled gray, urban camouflage jumpsuits trudged into the juncture of the two corridors. Three were carrying automatic rifles, and they all had pistols hanging from their belts. They looked wet, haggard, and disgruntled, not unlike the X-Men themselves. As if, after a long day of fruitlessly hunting mutants out in the miserable weather, they were spoiling for a fight. Her pulse beating rapidly, Shadowcat watched until they disappeared from sight.

The infiltrators prowled on, backtracking at one point to avoid passing by the open door of a cafeteria where some three dozen soldiers and SAFE agents sat eating biscuits, fruit cocktail, and fragrant, steaming beef stew. They were just about to turn down a branching corridor when Kitty heard a gasp.

She pivoted. A dozen feet behind them stood a gangly, freckle-faced GI who looked no older than sixteen. Evidently

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he'd just emerged from the restroom doorway on his left. His eyes wide, he clawed for his sidearm even as he sucked in a breath to yell.

Dracula lunged and knocked him cold with a single backhanded blow. To Kitty, the sharp crack of the impact seemed dreadfully loud, but with luck, it wouldn't be enough to alarm anyone all by itself. The soldier started to fall, and the vampire caught him. Then, to her horror, he bared his fangs.

She and Ororo both scrambled forward to stop him, but Logan was ahead of both of them. His claws snapping from their sockets, he whispered, "Don't even think about it. Give the kid to me."

"No," Dracula replied, just as softly. "I pledged that I wouldn't harm Excalibur or the X-Men. I said nothing of anyone else."

"Please," said Storm, "you spared one man for me."

Dracula smiled sardonically. "And therefore you assumed that I would always curb my natural urges to indulge you? Despite the love I feel for you, I fear that isn't possible. And isn't it sensible that I make certain that the boy won't wake and warn his compatriots of our presence?"

"He ain't wakin' up any time soon," said Logan, "not as hard as you tagged him."

"You can't be sure of that," the vampire said. "But I can. If I partake of his blood and so place him under my control—"

"You ain't gonna pass even a mild dose of your flamin' curse on to anybody else," the Canadian said. "Not for any reason, not while you're runnin' with me."

"But you'd have to attack me to prevent it," Dracula replied, sneering, "and our battle would undoubtedly make enough noise to draw everyone in this garrison down on our heads. I daresay we could then fight our way clear, but we might hurt or even kill any number of humans in the process,

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and in any case, we would fail to achieve our objective. You wouldn't want that."

"Nope," said Logan, "but it won't stop me, either. Count on it."

The two men, one tall and gaunt, the other short and muscular, stared into one another's eyes. At last Dracula grimaced and thrust the unconscious soldier into Wolverine's arms. "By defying me, you're jeopardizing the entire world for the sake of this one life," the vampire said. "You truly are as mindless as the animal you resemble."

"Yeah," said Logan, grinning and retracting his claws, "that's what people tell me. But on the plus side, I'm not the guy who blinked. I'll stash Beetle Bailey here in one of the bathroom stalls. With luck, nobody'll find him for awhile." He effortlessly lifted the soldier over his shoulder, then carried him into the men's room.

When he reemerged, the foursome skulked on. In another minute, they found a room containing half a dozen softly humming computers. Stacks of printouts and heaps of files stamped CLASSIFIED and EYES ONLY littered the work tables, and maps of the Natchez area hung on the wall.

It looked like a place for analyzing data and formulating strategy, and to Kitty's relief, no one was inside. Maybe the occupants were currently scarfing down supper in the mess.

The intruders hurried into the room and closed the door. Dracula remained beside it, perhaps to listen for people coming down the hall. Wolverine studied a wall map. "Interesting," he muttered, scratching his chin, his fingertip rasping against his beard stubble.

"What is?" Ororo asked.

"We can talk about it when we're out of here," he replied. "We may only have a couple minutes before somebody comes back. You're the computer ace, Kitty. Work a little magic for us."

Shadowcat dropped into the office chair in front of one of

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the terminals. "Magic coming up," she replied, grabbing the mouse and pulling down a menu. She clicked on an item and a prompt on the monitor asked her for her password. "Darn."

"Trouble?" asked Storm, flipping rapidly through one of the printouts.

"I hope not," Kitty said. She opened her belt pack and brought out a square gray plastic gadget half the size of a pack of cigarettes. She and Forge had designed the device together, the Cheyenne inventor creating the hardware and Kitty writing the software. She inspected the back of the computer, disconnected it from the other machines in the network, plugged her device into the port, and turned it on. The message on the monitor flickered, and the government computer's hard drive chattered.

"What is that thing?" asked Dracula. Evidently the clash with Logan hadn't left him too grumpy to be curious.

Kitty smiled. "A specialized minicomputer. Forge and I call it Raffles, in honor of a burglar in some book he read when he was in the hospital recovering from his war wounds. Basically, it's sort of like a cyber version of you. It takes control of other computers. If the guy who wrote SAFE's security software left himself a back door, or if it just isn't a superwonderful program, then Raff should crack it open and let me at the good stuff." The message on the screen changed to PASSWORD ACCEPTED. "Outstanding! She shoots, she scores!"

"Good," said Logan. He and Storm came over and crouched behind Kitty's chair. "What've we got?"

"Looks like profiles of a whole bunch of super people, including the X-Men," Shadowcat replied. "Along with contingency plans for taking us out if the government decides it needs to."

"Pretty much the same reports that I was just looking at on paper," Ororo said.

"We also have forensics from the scenes of Rogue's attacks

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and the autopsies of the victims, transcripts of testimony from a couple witnesses, and hey! Somebody shot some video.”

“Let’s see that,” said Logan. Dracula strode over to watch with the others, and Kitty double clicked on the icon for the MPEG file that contained the video.

The picture quality was miserable. The camera operator had shot it outdoors in the gloom and the pouring rain, backing away from the subject, hands shaking badly. Nonetheless, the video showed more than Kitty could easily bear.

The eye of the camcorder was peering through the plate-glass façade of a supermarket. The store was crowded with shoppers who had no doubt ventured out in the nasty weather to stock up on supplies to ride out the storm. Now, panic-stricken, they were scurrying this way and that as Rogue swooped around slaughtering them. She broke one elderly woman’s neck with a slap of her open hand. Caved in a stock boy’s chest with a front snap kick. Contemptuous of the flashing pistol in his hand, she flew straight at a policeman, picked him up, and hurled him twenty feet to crash through a display of Coca Cola bottles. At one point she paused in her rampage to shout. Kitty was no lip reader, but she assumed her former teammate was ranting about mutants striking back at human-kind.

Kitty realized that up until now, some part of her hadn’t quite believed that her friend could really have gone crazy and started killing innocent people. The actuality was horrible in a personal way that even the threat of Belasco devastating the entire world couldn’t match. She struggled to swallow away a lump in her throat.

After about half a minute, Rogue turned directly toward the camcorder, and at that point the video ended. No doubt the camera operator had prudently run away.

“An impressive display of ferocity,” Dracula murmured, “but at first glance, I see nothing helpful.”

“No?” Logan said. “Roll it again, Kitty.” Shadowcat

obeyed. On the monitor, Rogue lifted her hand to strike the old woman. Kitty wanted to flinch.

"Pause it," the Canadian said, and Kitty froze the image. "Notice anything?" She studied the screen, but saw nothing significant.

"She's wearing gloves," Ororo said suddenly. "When she attacked me above the river, her hands were bare."

"Give the lady a cigar. And when Cyke, Jean, and I fought her in the stable, they were the same way."

"Is that significant?" Dracula asked. "She could have removed her gloves, then put them back on again."

"No," said Storm, "I remember when she attacked me, her right glove and sleeve had been shredded. We've been assuming that she's attacking people because, with a vampire's essence poisoning her psyche, she wants to absorb their vitality. That certainly seemed to be the reason she turned on me. But she can't drain anyone through her gloves. That's why she wears them. She isn't . . . feeding here, simply battering her victims to death."

"Bring up those autopsy findings," said Wolverine. Kitty put them on the screen. "Now flip through them. I just need to skim."

"Weird," said Shadowcat a minute later. "Every body recovered at the scenes of the massacres was mangled in one way or another. There wasn't a single guy whose heart and other organs apparently just quit working, which I'm guessing is how the remains would look if Rogue grabbed him and sucked the life out of him."

"It's possible," said Dracula, "that the energy she drained from Ororo sated her, and for the time being, she doesn't crave any more."

"You wouldn't say that if you'd seen her in that stable," Logan replied. "She reminded me of a junkie needin' a fix. Besides, if she isn't killing people for their life force, why is she doing it?"

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"Perhaps the assault on her personality has driven her mad," the vampire said. "At certain moments, she may actually believe that she's attacking in concert with the rest of the X-Men in a coordinated attack on mankind."

Logan grunted. "Maybe, but it doesn't smell right. Kitty, have you got some kind of image-enhancing program available on that machine?"

"I'll see," she said, clicking the mouse and pulling down other menus. "Yeah, here it is."

"Run the video up to where Rogue was yelling about mutant liberation or whatever. That was the only moment when she wasn't streaking back and forth. Then stop it and give us the clearest, cleanest close-up of her face that you can get."

It took her about a minute to zero in on the raging murderer's face, then sharpen the picture as much as possible. When Kitty finished, Ororo caught her breath. "I don't see any redness in her eyes," the windrider said, "or fangs in her mouth, for that matter."

"I've made a study of all you X-Men," Dracula said, "and it's my understanding that one would expect those alterations to disappear over time."

"But the psychic pollution should fade right along with them," Logan replied. "That's the way it's always worked. But obviously she was still acting as vicious as ever."

Perhaps it was silly, considering that the whole human race was still in danger, but Kitty felt as if a weight had been lifted from her heart. Turning in the swivel chair, she said, "Then you think—"

"That Jeannie was right and I was wrong," said Wolverine. "We got two Rogues runnin' around Natchez. The real one that I saw in the stable, who was half vampire, but fightin' it. And a fake, who's doing all the high-profile killing. To sucker us into hunting her instead of the genuine article, and to get the government gunning for us."

"I think you may be right," said Dracula thoughtfully.

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"Although if Belasco dispatched an impostor to confuse us, I would expect him to make certain his agent was an exact double."

"He couldn't know beforehand that our Rogue was going to wind up with funky eyes and teeth," Kitty said. "Sometimes she takes on external physical features from guys she drains, sometimes she doesn't. It's unpredictable. And even if he had known, he probably would have given the phony Rogue the original face anyway. Remember, he was hoping that none of us would ever lay eyes on the real one again to make a comparison, and he wouldn't want the authorities to have any doubt that our Rogue truly is the murderer."

"I want a quick look at the statements of the witnesses," said Wolverine. "Then we'll make off with one of these maps and get the hell out of Dodge."

Phoenix sent her awareness sweeping back and forth across the city until the strain threatened to revive her headache. Then, knowing that she wouldn't be any use to anyone if she exhausted her powers, she reluctantly stopped scanning. She'd rest for a minute and then resume the effort.

At least, she thought wryly, she no longer felt as if she needed to stand in the driving rain while she searched. It wouldn't do to help save the world only to perish of pneumonia. She turned to see if Amanda was having any better luck than she was.

Unlike Jean and her fellow mutants, still cooling their heels in the cramped but comparatively dry space beneath the porte cochere, the Gypsy had chosen to stand beneath the open sky. The downpour pummeled her. Seemingly oblivious to it, she swayed sinuously back and forth, hands upraised, while dim blue globes of light drifted in the air before her. Occasionally one of the orbs jittered rapidly about for an instant, or exploded in a silent explosion of sparks.

An oval of shadow oozed into existence behind the azure

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spheres, a disk of deeper blackness hanging on the face of the night. Amanda slowly extended her arm toward it in a gesture of command, Jean felt some sort of charge building in the air, and then the black shape dissolved into tatters, while all the luminous orbs burst at once. Amanda's features twisted in frustration.

At once Kurt was at her side, half invisible in the darkness even though Jean was only a few feet away. "Easy, *liebchen*," he said.

"I'm sorry," the sorceress muttered. "I'm trying, but Belasco's shielding spells must be incredibly powerful."

"You don't have to be sorry," Nightcrawler said. "Everyone knows you're doing your best."

"I wish I were," said Amanda glumly. "At least then maybe I wouldn't feel so guilty. But we both know I could do more, if I were willing to pay the price."

The Bavarian scowled. "That is not an option."

Evidently Dracula hadn't related everything that had occurred before Excalibur hooked up with the X-Men. Jean opened her mouth to ask her friends what they were talking about, but at that moment, Ororo swooped down from the sky carrying Wolverine by the wrists. "Good news!" she cried.

"What is it?" cried Piotr. Scowling, throwing off waves of hatred that even Jean's psi shields couldn't wholly dampen, he'd been pacing like a caged tiger ever since the infiltration team departed on its errand. Now his muscles tensed as if he expected Storm to serve Belasco up for his vengeance that very instant.

"Rogue's not a murderer," Kitty said, emerging from the darkness and the rain. A black-furred, leather-winged horror, Dracula lit on the asphalt, then flowed into human form.

"Or at least we got reason to hope that she ain't caved in to the impulse yet," said Logan, stepping under the overhang and extracting his crumpled pack of cheroots from his belt. "She's not the one attackin' dozens of people at a time, any-

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way.” Phoenix felt a thrill of elation, and the Canadian gave her a crooked grin. “You can say you told me so if you want.”

Cyclops said, “Give us a full report.”

Wolverine proceeded to do so. When he finished, Jean said, “If Rogue hasn’t given in to her bloodlust yet, then obviously her true personality still exists. It’s possible that she can still be saved.” She hesitated. “As a matter of fact, I have an idea of how I might be able to do it.”

“That’s wonderful,” Ororo said, sitting down on the hood of the Blazer. Though she could walk with all her accustomed grace at need, she was attempting to stay off her bad ankle when possible.

Jean had tried to keep any trace of her worry from flowing across her psychic link with Scott. But when he spoke to her mind to mind, it was obvious she hadn’t succeeded. *This idea of yours is dangerous even by our standards, isn’t it?*

Yes, Jean admitted.

Then I think I can guess what it is, and I don’t like it one little bit.

I’m not crazy about it myself. But you know I have to try.

Scott hesitated, then grudgingly said, *Yes. I do. I’ll watch your back when the time comes.*

“I’m glad to hear about Rogue,” said Kurt, “but—”

“But this information doesn’t put us any closer to stopping Belasco,” Piotr interrupted. “And we only have a few hours left to find him!”

“Or to keep Rogue from reachin’ him,” said Logan, taking a drag on his cheroot. “You’re right, but I got some thoughts on that. Check this out.” He removed a map from his belt, squatted, and spread it on the asphalt. His comrades gathered around the display.

“The dots of red ink are Rogue sightings,” the Canadian said. “Notice that except for this one over here—” he pointed “—they’re all in the southeast quadrant of the map. The one

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that ain't was an incident where Rogue roughed some woman up, but suddenly broke off and flew away without killing her, or babbling any gibberish about the X-Men declaring war on the city, either. I'm guessing that was the real Rogue. All the other dots are massacres, and like I explained, that's the phony Rogue. My hunch is that Belasco wants us hunting her in this area because his hideout is somewhere else, and as he pulls the real Rogue closer and closer to him, she'll be in that same area too."

"That makes sense," said Jean, "but unfortunately, 'somewhere else' is still most of the map. You probably haven't narrowed the search area enough for it to make a difference to my psi scanning."

"Or to my scrying," Amanda said.

"Much as I hate to say it," said Nightcrawler, his yellow eyes shining in the shadowy vagueness of his features, "in one respect our task seems even more difficult than before. At least the woman we *thought* we were hunting emerges from hiding periodically to kill. If we were quick enough, we might be able to catch her in the midst of committing one of her atrocities. But neither the real Rogue nor Belasco are doing anything likely to attract our attention."

Logan nodded. "Exactly. Which is why I'm thinkin' that we ought to catch ourselves the ringer."

"But that does not make sense!" Colossus said. "What the impostor is doing is monstrous. Of course we have to stop her as soon as we have the time. But you said it yourself. She's a diversion. Belasco wants us to chase her."

"Chase her, yes," Cyclops said, frowning thoughtfully, "catch her, no. Otherwise she wouldn't hit and run the way she has. It's a good bet that she knows where Belasco is, and if we got our hands on her, Jean could pull the location from her mind."

"That's what I'm thinkin'," Logan said.

"It sounds promising," said Kurt, "assuming that we can

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catch her in time. We have to assume that Belasco has shielded her against long-range telepathy and magic, and she's roaming a fairly large area. It would be helpful if we could predict where she's going to strike next. I assume it will be yet another location where there are a large number of potential victims assembled, so she can run up an impressive body count quickly."

"Back at the armory," said Shadowcat, tugging at a tangle in her brown hair, "I wondered if she might hit there. It sure looked like SAFE and the Army were worried about the possibility."

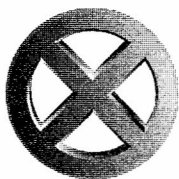
Logan shook his head. "They don't need to be. Remember, Belasco wants the feds hunting the X-Men. They can't do that if his flunky takes them out. Kurt's on the money. The fake'll hit some other place where there are a bunch of people. Beyond that, we need to find the pattern in where she's popped up so far."

"If she didn't want people to anticipate her next move," said Jean, "wouldn't she strike more or less randomly?"

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" Wolverine replied. "But people fall into patterns without realizing it, even when they're trying not to. I learned that back when I was a spy. Now, our girl probably thinks she was being slippery by hitting at locations that are relatively far apart. But look at this." He moved his fingertip from one ink dot to the next.

"It's a zigzag," Kitty said.

"Bingo," said Logan. "Jumping from west to east and back again, and gradually dropping from north to south. Which means that next time, she ought to show up somewhere around here." His finger drew a circle on the map. "We need to figure out all the prime locations for a massacre and stake 'em out."



CHAPTER 13



The shabby, white wooden house looked as if the pounding rain was likely to wash the rest of its peeling paint away. By now, the front yard inside the barbed-wire fence was one big black puddle, the surface of which reflected the lightning flickering overhead. The water stank of the saturated septic tank and drain field buried beneath it. A long aluminum boat equipped with an outboard motor sat on the front porch steps, ready for use in case, as seemed increasingly likely, the Mississippi broke its bonds and raged across the city.

Rogue had spent the last few hours trying to escape into the countryside, where there should be fewer potential victims to tempt her. Unfortunately, she kept blacking out, and when she came to herself, she invariably found that she'd reversed course and flown right back to Natchez. Now the hunger wrenched at her insides, agonizing, unbearable, and she plummeted toward the home beneath her, her tattered clothing flapping.

She splashed down beside a lighted window, then peeked through the gap between the curtains. On the other side was a living room, where a black family—a beefy man in overalls, a thin woman with corn-rowed hair tinted the color of a new penny, and a young boy and girl—sat watching a news broadcast on television. The father looked worried, and the mother, exasperated, as if the problems afflicting Natchez were a personal affront. The kids, on the other hand, were happily dividing their attention between the television and the Chutes and Ladders game laid out on the floor between them. They probably didn't really understand that if a flood came, it could wash their home away.

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Of course, thought Rogue, smirking, if they were already lying dead when the river came calling, it wouldn't matter. The water could carry them away along with their possessions and give them a burial at sea. The idea seemed hilarious. She floated off the ground, poisoning herself to smash through the window and attack.

Then a spasm of horror wracked her. Sobbing, momentarily losing control of her power of flight, she fell into mud and filthy water, then struggled to crawl away from the enticing prey so conveniently at hand.

Crimson light flowered above her. Lifting her head, she beheld the transparent vision which had appeared to her repeatedly over the course of the day. Adoration, hope, and hatred all welled up inside her simultaneously, the grinding of her contradictory emotions almost as excruciating as her thirst for the vitality of others. "Master?" she croaked. "Angel?"

"Yes, my child," the swordsman said, "that's right. Are you ready to come to me and let me take the pain away?"

"Yes," she said. "I mean, no! You're not my friend! I know you're not my friend!"

The figure in the cloak and tunic regarded her gravely. Even through the veil of blur that obscured his features, she could feel the pity in his eyes. "I *am* your friend, and if your mind were your own, you'd know it. It's the other, the abominable thing that's striving to steal your life, that rightly regards me as its foe."

"How can I be sure of that?" she answered. The shape she was in, how could she be sure of anything?

"Look deep inside yourself," the apparition said, "past all the pain and turmoil, and you'll find the tie of love and trust that binds us."

He was right, that was exactly what she felt. But she despised him as well, and had no idea which feelings were truly hers, and which the invader's. A fresh pang of hunger made

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her muscles clench, and wrung an anguished groan from between her teeth.

"Please," the swordsman said, "I implore you, don't subject yourself to any more of this torment. Pass through the pain and into glory. Embrace your destiny."

Should she trust him? If Professor Xavier were here, what would he advise? As soon as she thought of the telepath, she imagined the ecstasy of absorbing the awesome energies of his mind, and, loving and loathing the predator she'd become, pounded the ground in rage. Her fist splashed up water and clots of muck. "I *want* to trust you," she said. "I don't even remember why I shouldn't. But..." She realized she no longer knew what she'd meant to say next. Soon, she feared, she wouldn't be able to frame and hold a coherent thought at all.

"I wanted to spare you any additional pain," said the phantom in red. "But perhaps you have to sink even deeper into your sorrows before you can rise again. Go back to the window."

"I can't," she said. "If I look at that family again, I'll attack them." The idea triggered a pulse of anticipation.

"No, you won't," the swordsman said. "I'll help you control yourself." He waved his left hand, and the hunger burning inside Rogue weakened, still gnawing at her, but not as fiercely as before.

Even that measure of relief inspired a profound gratitude, but like all her emotions, the feeling was impure, tainted with bewilderment and anger. "Why didn't you do that before?" she asked.

"Because it exhausts me," he said, "and the benefit is fleeting. As I told you, I can do little that will truly help you until we meet in the flesh. Now please, go to the window."

She clambered up from the muddy ground and did as he'd bade her. Just as she peeked through the curtains again, her own face appeared on the television screen.

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The sight alarmed her and made her want to flinch away. Instead, she strained to hear the news anchor's solemn bass voice through the glass.

"... death count stands at seventy-two," the reporter said. "So far, Rogue has targeted large gatherings of people, so the authorities are urging everyone to stay at home if possible. But if you must leave—if you have to evacuate to escape a flood—rest assured that the police and the military are doing everything possible to protect the evacuation routes, emergency shelters, and other public facilities from another attack."

"No!" wailed Rogue, lurching back around toward the apparition. "I didn't kill those people! I'd remember!"

"If only that were so," said the figure in red. "Yet the truth is that you've been blacking out all day."

"But if I drained that many people, how can I still be starving?"

"No one's essence can sate you for long. That's a part of your malady. Come to me and let me cure it before you slaughter any more innocent strangers, or any more of your friends."

"Ororo." Her fists clenched, and tears stung her eyes, while at the same time, she relished the memory of just how delicious it had felt to absorb the windrider's superhuman energies.

"And not just Ororo," the swordsman said gently. "Scott. Jean. Logan. Remember the confrontation in the stable where you went to ground?"

Muddled impressions of the battle crawled through her head. Wielding Storm's mutant abilities along with her own, she'd crushed her teammates as if they were puny, helpless humans. It had been glorious.

No! No, it hadn't! It had been a nightmare. She clutched at her temples as if she could break open her skull and pluck Helen's spirit out.

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"Wolverine attacked you with his claws," the vision said. "That's why your clothes are in rags. Cyclops battered you with his optic blast, and Phoenix with her telekinesis. None of it truly hurt you very much, but it drove you into a frenzy, and in the end . . ." He waved his hand.

A circular hole opened in the air, and on the other side was the shadowy interior of the stable. Scattered about the floor lay the motionless forms of her friends, their features contorted with their death agonies, their bodies shriveled as if by some wasting disease.

"I'm sorry," she whispered to them, and then, to her horror, realized that she was grinning with glee at her victory.

The image vanished. "Please, come to me," said the man in red.

"Yes," she said heavily, "I will." She certainly couldn't go on like this, a mass murderer, a menace to those she loved and everyone else on Earth. Even if the angel meant her harm, even if he killed her, she'd be better off than she was right now.

But really, she knew he wouldn't hurt her. Now that she'd made her decision, her doubts dropped away. She loved him, revered him, needed him, and could no longer imagine why she'd ever even contemplated flouting his will.

The phantom grinned. "At last."

"How do I find you?" she asked.

"In the old church, of course," he said. "You've been inching your way towards it since the beginning, so you must know the way."

She realized that she did.

Storm and Wolverine crouched on the wet, slick, canted roof of a fast-food taco franchise which was supposed to resemble an old Spanish mission, clinging to the fake belfry to anchor themselves in place. Down the flooded street stood a five-story hospital which looked like a prime location for another mas-

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sacre. Their fellow X-Men, Amanda, and Dracula had taken up positions elsewhere in the area to keep watch over other likely sites. Those who couldn't move at superhuman speed had partnered with those who could fly or teleport them around.

Pelted by the wind and the rain, the windrider wished she still had her cape to wrap around her. "Why don't you just make yourself dry?" asked Logan. Since he was looking in the other direction, peering through a small but powerful pair of night-vision binoculars, she assumed that he must have heard her tremble.

"To tell you the truth," she said, "I'm not sure that my powers have come back to maximum strength even now. I would prefer to save my energy."

"Oh. Well, for what it's worth, once we get home, the cold and flu medicine's on me."

"I should make that purchase, since it was my responsibility to stop the rain."

"Don't worry, we will, though I admit we're cuttin' it close. The river's mighty high."

She grimaced. "I hope you're right."

He lowered the binoculars and turned to look at her. "Hey, you're not allowed to be demoralized now that Amanda's taken Belasco's whammy off us. As a field leader, you're supposed to set a good gung-ho example for humble grunts like me."

A smile momentarily tugged at the corners of her mouth. "I've seen you in many different moods, my friend, but I don't recall ever meeting the humble Wolverine. I don't mean to sound defeatist. But I can't help thinking how elaborate Belasco's scheme has turned out to be. How artfully he's manipulated us, and how many obstacles he's placed in our path. We want to believe that we've finally figured out a way to deal with him, but what if we're mistaken? What if he ex-

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pected us to do precisely what we're doing? What if we're still playing the game according to his rules?"

Logan shrugged. "You just have to have faith that the creep does make mistakes, and that we can take advantage of them. Otherwise we might as well go home to the mansion, knock back a few brews, and wait for Great Cthulhu—or whatever it is that Belasco works for—to show up and suck out our spleens. And hey, if we X-Men don't have a right to believe in ourselves, who does? Look how many times we've beaten the odds."

"I can't argue with that," Ororo said. Lightning flared, momentarily revealing a speck streaking across the sky. "Look there!" She pointed.

Wolverine quickly clasped the binoculars to his eyes. "Got her," he said after a second. "It's our girl, flyin' like a bat out of hell." He yanked a GCS Unit from his wide red belt. "Target sighted. She's comin' out of the west and probably headed for the hospital."

"Roger that," Scott responded.

"Understood," said Amanda, a crackle of static breaking up her voice.

"We're on our way," said Kurt.

Ororo spoke to the wind, and a howling updraft lifted her off the roof. She extended her hands to Wolverine, and then a searchlight blazed down from overhead and caught them in its glare. Despite the sheets of rain, it dazzled her, but, squinting, she could tell that it was shining from a SAFE hovercraft.

"Freeze, X-Men," said an amplified voice.

"Perfect timing," growled Logan as he grabbed Ororo's hands. She lifted him, the phlanged rod on the nose of the airship glowed white, and the roof of the taco franchise exploded.

Nightcrawler and Dracula, the latter in his winged, half-bat form, crouched on a ledge two thirds of the way up the façade

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of an office building. The mutant supposed that they might well have been mistaken for a pair of gargoyles had anyone spotted them at all.

His shoulders hunched against the cold, steady rain, Kurt wished he could have kept watch with Amanda. She could have used the moral support that he was best able to give her. But tactical considerations had dictated that she partner with Piotr, whom she could teleport at need. The Bavarian took what solace he could from the fact that Dracula wasn't with her either, and was thus unable to taunt and tempt her.

"Are you afraid," said the vampire unexpectedly, "that if Miss Sefton becomes a true adept, your paltry mutant talents will cease to impress her?" In his current shape, his voice had a snarling, bestial roughness, but was still perfectly understandable.

"No," said Kurt, "I simply don't want her to turn into anything that remotely resembles you."

"Belasco was right about one thing. How little you know yourself. How blind you are to your own capacity for selfishness."

The image of that other Kurt Wagner, Belasco's depraved toady, came to Nightcrawler's mind, and he did his best to push it away. "Whereas you revel in your dark side. For which I probably shouldn't blame you, since it's the only side you have."

Dracula laughed. "Touché, Wagner. But superior men have the right and indeed the duty to pursue their ambitions, no matter what the cost to others. Where would the world be if Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar—"

Logan's voice spoke from Kurt's wrist radio. He and Storm had sighted the impostor heading for the hospital. Nightcrawler tersely acknowledged the call.

The plan was to allow the fake to descend to the ground before closing in on her and attacking. That way, X-Men like Wolverine, Piotr, and Kurt himself, who could neither fly nor

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attack at range, could get at her. For the moment, the Bavarian mutant intended to teleport himself to a spot that afforded a good view of the hospital. Then, when the killer arrived, he'd make a final jump and have at her. If she was as powerful as the real Rogue, his efforts would only provide a distraction at best. But he hoped he could at least keep her from killing any innocent civilians until his comrades entered the fray.

Dracula would have to flap along to the battlefield under his own steam. Kurt was capable of teleporting with another person, but the effort not only drained his strength but, for some reason, that of his passenger as well, and that was no good when they were heading into a fight.

He prepared to displace himself, and Dracula spread his enormous black wings. Then a white light flashed across the rooftops of the city, almost like the flare of the thunderbolts, but not quite. The boom of an explosion came a second later.

"What the devil?" Dracula said.

Two hovercrafts floated down from the sky, their searchlights catching the figures on the ledge. The vampire hissed, and Nightcrawler squinted and raised his arm against the glare. "We're agents of the United States government," said an amplified female voice, "and you're under arrest. Stay where you are and put up your hands."

Dracula's wings beat, a sound like the crack of a whip, as he leapt from his perch and hurtled upward at the nearer of the two airships. The energy weapons mounted on the SAFE vehicles glowed.

Kurt reflexively teleported to the roof of a bank across the street. A split second later, brilliant beams of force spat from the hovercraft. One pulverized the section of ledge where he'd just been standing, sending chunks of concrete showering down into the standing water below. The other smashed into Dracula, hurling him back against the side of the building.

Nightcrawler realized he had a decision to make. He didn't know how SAFE had spotted him and Dracula, but given his

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powers of teleportation and near invisibility in darkness, it was a good bet that he could shake his attackers off his tail and go where he was supposed to go. With his ability to dissolve into mist, Dracula ought to be able to do the same, albeit considerably more slowly. But would he?

Evidently not. His wings shredded, but reknitting themselves by the second, the undead creature rose at the hovercraft, this time veering unpredictably back and forth to throw off the gunner's aim.

Kurt grimaced. He supposed he could neither abandon his enraged ally to fight alone nor, assuming the vampire prevailed, to deal with his attackers as savagely he might prefer. And perhaps it would be better after all to knock out the hovercraft now, lest they find their way to the hospital and interfere with the operation there. He only prayed that he and Dracula could win this skirmish quickly.

One of the floating gunships pivoted in his direction. Evidently it had infrared or some other capability which negated his ability to disappear into shadow, at least at this distance. He teleported onto the vehicle's dull gray rounded roof.

Since it wasn't hurtling and jolting through the air the way the *Midnight Runner* had, he had no difficulty clinging to the ship. Smiling, imagining the frantic efforts of the agents on board to determine where he'd jumped to this time, he crawled toward one of the windows. Once he got a peek at the interior, he could teleport inside without fear of a bungled arrival.

Agony blazed through his body, while his muscles juddered, clenched, and locked. He'd underestimated his adversaries. Somehow they'd been able to discern exactly where he was, and also to electrify the hull.

He had to break free before the current incapacitated or even killed him. Though still unable to see his destination, he tried to teleport a third time.

At first nothing happened, and he was afraid that the pain was impairing his mutant power as much as his motor control.

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Then, suddenly, he was safely inside the cramped confines of the hovercraft. Immediately, the occupants, a young man and woman in black bodysuits, spun around in their chairs, scrambled to their feet, and snatched for the pistols in their holsters.

Kurt was shaking uncontrollably from the shock he'd endured a moment before. He wasn't sure he could even make a purposeful move, much less fight, but he had little choice but to try. He hurled himself forward, punching.

His first blow at the young man missed outright. Abandoning his efforts to draw his sidearm, the SAFE agent grabbed him, slammed him against a bulkhead, then seized his neck in a choke hold. Meanwhile the other operative yanked out her automatic and pointed it at Kurt's face.

Nightcrawler frantically snatched for her wrist with his tail, snagged it, and jerked it just as the gun flashed and banged, the explosion painfully loud in the enclosed space. The bullet clanged into the bulkhead scant inches from his skull.

Maintaining his grip on the woman's shooting arm, Kurt broke free of her partner's stranglehold by simultaneously jamming his arms upward between his attacker's and kneeing him in the groin. The male agent's mouth fell open, and he stumbled backward. Kurt knocked him cold with a punch to the jaw, then pivoted and gave the female operative, who was still wrestling with his tail, the same treatment.

That, thought Nightcrawler, gasping, still twitching spastically, was a lot harder than it should have been. He had no idea who in the U.S. government had come up with the idea of an agency whose only agenda was to deal with superhumans, but he hoped the officious busybody would lose the next election.

He wished he could simply slump down in one of the seats and pull himself together, but knew there wasn't time. Scrambling into the cockpit, he quickly made sure that the hovercraft was floating in place and not about to crash into anything,

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then peered through the windshield to see how Dracula was faring against the other gunship.

The vampire was clinging to its hull, the talons of one hand sunk into the metal to anchor himself, the fingers of the other striving to tear open the hatch. Kurt had no doubt that the crew were currently doing their best to electrocute their assailant, but as far as the X-Man could tell, the current wasn't even slowing Dracula down.

In another second, the lock broke, and the hatch swung outward. Dracula ripped it from its hinges and dropped it toward the street below. As he swung himself on board, he flowed into human form, perhaps because his huge wings would get in his way in the cabin.

Kurt waited for Dracula to clear the opening, then teleported aboard the other hovercraft, where the vampire was lunging at the crewmen. They in turn were frantically shooting him, to no perceptible effect. The creature in the cloak dropped one with a sweep of his open hand, then paralyzed the other simply by gazing into his eyes.

Nightcrawler reached beneath his tabard for the crucifix. "Dracula!" he said sharply.

The king of the undead turned, and, noticing the position of his ally's hand, smiled sardonically. "You trust that trinket too much. But have no fear. I know I don't have time to feed."

"Good," Kurt replied. Once again, he made sure the airship wasn't about to crash. "Let's go rendezvous with the others." They moved back to the open hatch.

A third hovercraft dropped into view.

"Fighting these fools isn't helping us catch the impostor," Dracula said. "Go. I'll elude them and follow as quickly as I can."

"Right," said Kurt, hoping the creature spoke the truth, and teleported.

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Scott, Jean, and Kitty had stationed themselves atop a flat rooftop, sharing it with what Cyclops considered to be a rather cryptic billboard. It didn't have any writing on it, and a person might actually have to study it for a moment to make out the shape of the dromedary hidden in the psychedelic green and yellow swirls. As he and Shadowcat kept watch, passing his binoculars back and forth, and Jean doggedly scanned with her telepathy, he wondered idly just how many cigarettes this particular ad campaign had actually sold.

But when Logan's call came in, all such extraneous thoughts instantly vanished from his mind, and no doubt from the minds of his companions as well. He'd barely acknowledged the message when Jean lifted him and Kitty in her psychokinetic grasp. Although the younger woman could walk or run on air, she couldn't do so any faster than a nonmutant could move on the ground, and thus needed the assistance to reach the hospital in a timely manner.

Several blocks away, a white light blazed. "What's that?" Kitty cried.

Thanks to their psychic link, Cyclops felt Jean investigating with her mental powers. "A hovercraft is attacking Ororo and Logan," the redhead said after a moment. "Do we keep on toward the hospital?"

"Yes," Scott replied grimly. "We absolutely have to catch the impostor, which means that we'll have to trust Wolverine and Storm to manage on their own."

"Right," said Jean. They streaked on through the rain, and more flares lit up the night. Judging from the direction, Scott surmised that SAFE was attacking Kurt and Dracula too.

"It's not fair!" Kitty said. "We're fighting to save the world, and they're trying to kill us!"

So what else is new? Scott thought sourly, and then Jean spun him around to face the hovercraft that was swooping silently down from the darkness like a huge metal owl.

The flanged rod on the ship's nose glowed, and Cyclops

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reflexively fired at it. His scarlet optic blast caught it dead on and shattered it, jolting the entire hovercraft in the process. The stub of the weapon exploded an instant later.

Nice shot, said Jean across their psychic link, just as flaps in the hovercraft's belly dropped to reveal twin banks of missiles, which instantly hurtled from their mountings.

Snapping his head from left to right, Scott swept his optic blast in an arc which detonated half the rockets midway between the hovercraft and himself. Meanwhile, Jean created a telekinetic shield to block the rest, grunting as if she'd been punched when they slammed into the barrier. Kitty, whose powers were of limited application in the present situation, simply became intangible, protecting herself and relieving Phoenix of the burden of supporting her.

The exploding missiles rocked the hovercraft. Before it could recover, Jean's telekinesis carried Scott under it and then behind it, as he raked its jet assemblies with his optic blast.

Crippled, the airship fell. Straining once again, Jean shoved it, shortening the drop considerably by dumping it atop a roof. Thanks to her effort, the men inside had presumably survived the impact.

Phoenix looked at Kitty. "Ready?"

"Yes," the younger woman said. Becoming solid once more, she dropped an inch, and then Jean's psychokinesis caught her. The three mutants flew on.

A pair of snipers fired from upper-story windows. Cyclops knocked out one and Jean stunned the other with a mental bolt. Elsewhere in the night, white flares pierced the downpour and the gloom. Explosions roared, and automatic weapons chattered.

Scott wondered just how many of his comrades would make it to the hospital, and just how difficult it might be to fight their way clear again. Because it was now obvious that the hovercraft hadn't just stumbled across them. While the X-Men had been making plans to trap the fake Rogue, SAFE

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and the Army had also managed to predict in what vicinity she'd next appear, and made extensive preparations to take out any mutants who showed their face there.

A chain-link fence surrounded the construction site. A small bulldozer sat under a crane, and runoff water gurgled as it streamed into the square pit in the center of the lot. In the darkness, Piotr's hulking metallic form might easily have been mistaken for yet another piece of heavy equipment.

Like Amanda, the Russian spent most of the time watching the sky and the Salvation Army facility across the street. But every so often, the sorceress caught him staring at her. Condemning her for what he regarded as her cowardice or her selfishness, she supposed.

Amanda didn't know what to say to him, or even what she ought to feel. When Logan's call came in, it was a relief. If they could catch Rogue's double now, then with luck, Dracula's offer to empower her wouldn't matter anymore.

"Let's go," Piotr said. She took his huge steel hand, recited the trigger word inside her head, and transported the two of them to the hospital parking lot, where she found herself to be almost knee-deep in water. Grimacing, she hastily took cover by crouching behind a car, and Colossus did the same.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then white lights began to flare across the rooftops of the city. "What in the name of the White Wolf is this?" Piotr growled.

"Trouble," said Amanda, just as a massive armored vehicle lumbered out of the rain. Its turret cannon swiveled in their direction, and a red dot of light swept across the bodies of the parked cars. "And here's our piece of it."

Gripping Logan's hands, Ororo yanked him away from the roof, then, or so it seemed to the Canadian, rode the shock-wave of the blast as she'd ride the wind. The hovercraft piv-

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oted in the air, taking aim once more, and she veered back and forth to keep out of its sights.

"Throw me at it!" said Wolverine. "Then get after the fake!"

"What?"

"The feds are bushwhackin' us. We can't count on her to go on to the hospital, not in the middle of a firefight. She might turn tail, and right now, you're the only flyer who's close enough to stop her. So go! I'll keep the hovercraft off your back."

Ororo gave a nod and let him go. A wind bore him up and hurled him at the airship like an arrow.

He slammed into the nose with a force sufficient to break a normal man's bones. It might even have knocked him out for a second, because time seemed to skip, and then, revived by his high-speed metabolism, he found himself slipping off the butt of the energy cannon into space.

He grabbed the rod, straddled it, popped his claws, then, snarling in approved mad dog berserker fashion, faking it this time around, slashed furiously at the window in the front of the cockpit. He didn't know if he'd be able to cut through, but it didn't matter. At the moment, all he cared about was distracting the crew from messing with Ororo, and judging by the wide-eyed, panicky expressions of the two clean-cut kids behind the glass, he was succeeding.

The fed in the pilot's seat hit on the idea of bucking the ship up and down and back and forth in an effort to unseat his unwanted passenger. *Nice try, kid*, Logan thought, beginning to enjoy himself, *but no cigar. I can ride a bull or a bronc, and I can ride this piece of junk too.*

The X-Man doubted that the windshield was made of anything much like ordinary glass. It was probably some high-tech, space-age, state-of-the-art, supposedly indestructible polymer. Nevertheless, his claws began to crack and gouge it, increasing the terror of the guys inside the ship another notch.

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He guessed he was actually going to be able to break in and put them out of their misery.

Then electricity crackled through his body, searing him with agony, paralyzing him. When it finally stopped, he was too spastic to keep his balance. He fell for what seemed a long way, splashed down in water, then banged his head on the hard surface beneath it. He plummeted once more, this time into oblivion.

Ororo hated to leave Logan behind. Formidable as he was, his talents were by no means ideally suited to neutralizing a gunship in flight. But she knew he was right. If the false Rogue turned and ran, she was the only one who had a prayer of stopping her.

Or at least she hoped she did. Her mind was clear again, but had she recovered sufficient strength to defeat such a powerful adversary all by herself? Frowning, she strove to thrust doubt out of her mind. To trust in the Goddess and herself.

First, of course, she had to find the impostor, or she'd never even get the chance to put herself to the test. And for a few moments, peering about, soaring upward through the fury of the wind and rain, she couldn't spot her target anywhere. But at last she caught sight of the hurtling figure she'd seen before.

She smiled. When it came to fighting or hunting, Wolverine's instincts rarely played him false, and they hadn't this time, either. The impostor was beating a hasty retreat. Indeed, she was nearly over the river already. Ororo spoke to the wind, urging it to bear her along even faster, to close the gap between her and her quarry, and, roaring, the wind obeyed.

Ordinarily Storm wouldn't attack an unfamiliar foe with the maximum force at her command for fear of killing her. But by all accounts, the fake Rogue was so powerful that she'd *have* to cut loose to take her out. Nor did she much like to strike from ambush, without giving her opponent a chance to surrender, but with the future of the human race at stake, this

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was no time for niceties. She reached up into the thunderclouds and drew down what she needed.

Lightning blazed, transfixing the form of the murderer with Rogue's features. Thunder bellowed, the boom deafening. As the dazzling flare winked out, the impostor tumbled, and Ororo swooped after her. Then the impostor arrested her fall, looked around, spotted her attacker, and streaked up at her.

Ororo's mouth tightened in disappointment. For a moment she'd dared to hope that one lightning bolt had decided the battle, but obviously it wasn't going to be that easy. Retreating backward and higher into the sky, she extended her arms.

Her tangled brown, white-streaked hair streaming in the wind, the impostor immediately began to zigzag unpredictably back and forth, dodging just as Ororo herself had done to foil the marksmanship of the men aboard the hovercraft. Storm discharged crackling bolts of electricity from her fingertips, but failed to hit her mark.

Perhaps she needed to let the impostor get closer, the drawback of that tactic being that distance was her own best defense. Her ability to command the forces of nature notwithstanding, her flesh and bones were no more resistant to damage than those of a normal human being. If her inhumanly strong adversary got her hands on her, she could easily tear her limb from limb.

Well, the Professor had never claimed that serving in the X-Men was going to be safe.

She stopped retreating and likewise held her fire until the killer flew close enough for her to discern just how perfect a double for Rogue she actually was. Then she hurled another pair of sizzling thunderbolts.

The attacks caught the fake in the chest. She shuddered spasmodically and fell a few yards, then, shrieking in rage, rocketed at Ororo once more. The windrider tried to gather the power for another blast, but the charge started building too sluggishly to do her any immediate good.

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Ororo dodged sideways and downward. Fists outstretched, the false Rogue streaked past her with inches to spare, then wheeled for another attack. The two women spun around each other like leaves in a cyclone, the impostor punching, grabbing, and kicking, the X-Man striving to stay just out of her reach, buffeting her with gusts of hurricane-force wind to knock her off balance and hamper her attacks.

Often the killer's blows missed by a hair, but she never actually connected. Quick as she was, Ororo was a shade more agile in flight, an asset, she reflected, which might keep her safe right up until the moment when fatigue began to slow her down.

Finally she built up another potent charge of electricity. Enough for one more full-force attack, anyway. She wasn't sure just how many critical seconds it would take her to accumulate another after that, or to muster the wherewithal to call more lightning from the clouds, and she very much doubted that she could overcome the impostor just by pummeling her with the wind. So she'd better make this shot count.

Gasping for effect, she slowed her evasive maneuvers. Already leering in anticipation of victory, the false Rogue lunged at her. Storm let her close almost to arm's length, then hurled a flare of electricity into her face.

The next instant, the impostor slammed into her like a cannonball, driving the wind from her lungs, stunning her, impelling her across the sky. Entangled with the other woman, Ororo struggled frantically to shove her away. Finally she realized that the fake was unconscious. That last burst of lightning, applied more or less directly to her brain, had done the trick.

Ororo also noticed that the two of them were falling. Thank the Goddess that at least that wasn't a problem anymore. She called for an updraft, and then, clutching her prisoner under the arms, flew back toward the spot where she'd left Logan, toward weapons flashing and barking in the night.

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Neither Logan nor the hovercraft were in the same location. But down the street in front of the hospital, a battle raged. A number of SAFE airships, armored ground vehicles, and infantry had more or less surrounded the rest of Ororo's friends. As she watched, Colossus staggered through a hail of machine-gun fire, the slugs ricocheting off his steel body, picked up a Bradley personnel carrier, and flipped it onto its back with its weaponry pointing in the wrong direction. Scott's red optic blast and iridescent waves of Amanda's sorcery smashed at a tank. Kurt blinked through a mass of rifles, punching and teleporting, punching and teleporting, leaving a trail of smoke clouds behind him. Jean's telekinesis gripped one hovercraft and pounded it against another. Kitty ran through the air toward a third airship, relying on her phasing power to get her safely inside, where she could use her martial arts against the crew. Abruptly she reeled, evidently under attack by something—an ultrasound weapon perhaps—which could affect an intangible target, then dropped behind the cover provided by the overturned Bradley.

Logan was nowhere to be seen. Storm hoped he was all right, merely unable to penetrate the ring of soldiers to rejoin his friends. There was no sign of Dracula, either.

Ororo thought that her teammates could extricate themselves from this pointless battle, but perhaps not quickly, and possibly not without doing serious harm to some of their misguided assailants. It would be far preferable if she could stop the hostilities immediately. And maybe she could, if she could just get the federal agents' attention.

Trying to ignore her weariness, she hovered above the fight, high enough that no one was likely to notice her prematurely, and summoned up what remained of her power for one final effort. When she felt focused, ready to invoke the forces that were hers to direct, she commanded the storm, and it obeyed her.

Lightning bolts blasted the earth between the X-Men and

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their attackers, again and again and again, a display of nature's violence that put the effects of any weapon on the ground to shame. Thunder roared on and on, a sound like the foundations of the universe breaking apart. In the aftermath, the soldiers and SAFE agents stood gaping in stupefaction.

Seizing the moment, Storm floated down and lit on the blackened patch of ground she'd just devastated. Her legs were rubbery, but it was never wise to display true weakness to an adversary, so she made herself stand straight and tall. "There's no need for this fight," she said. "The X-Men haven't declared war on *Homo sapiens*. We came to Natchez to apprehend the murderer who's been impersonating our teammate Rogue. And here she is." Clenching her jaw, hoping that no one could see how much the effort cost her, she hoisted her unconscious captive up for everyone's inspection.

For a second, the SAFE agents and soldiers simply continued to stare at her. Then an amplified female voice said, "Hold your fire." A hovercraft floated to the ground, the hatch opened, and a slender black woman climbed out into the rain. Clad in the same black bodysuit as the other SAFE agents, she had some sort of energy pistol holstered on her hip, and wore a helmet that incorporated radio gear. Her strong, rather attractive features wore an expression as serious and intent as Cyclops's "game face."

"I'm Major Nefertiti Jones of SAFE," she said, striding toward Ororo. "I'm in charge here. Now, if you're not responsible for the killing, and you've captured the person who is, good. But I still have orders to take you all into custody."

"That's unacceptable," said Scott, advancing to stand with Ororo. Behind him, the other X-Men moved up as well. "The impostor's crimes, heinous as they were, were only intended to divert attention from a threat to the entire world, and at best, we only have a few hours left to defuse that situation. We can't waste the time hanging around while you interrogate us."

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"Sorry," said Major Jones, "but like I said, I have orders to detain you, and that's the way it'll have to be."

Ororo felt a pang of anger. She suspected that if the Avengers or the Fantastic Four had claimed they needed to rush off to save the planet, this glorified policewoman would have released them without a second thought. But as usual, when mutants were involved, it was a different story.

"We'll smash our way out of here if we have to," growled Piotr, glaring. The soldiers and SAFE agents behind Major Jones eyed him warily.

"Indeed we will," said Dracula. Ororo hadn't seen the vampire skulk from the darkness, and she jumped. Even Major Jones looked disconcerted for an instant. "But perhaps it needn't come to that."

"Who are you?" asked Major Jones.

"One of our allies," said Scott quickly. "He prefers to remain anonymous." Storm was grateful for her teammate's circumspection. It was likely to be difficult enough to win the authorities' trust without announcing that the X-Men were working with Count Dracula.

The vampire gave Scott an amused glance, then directed his attention back toward the SAFE agent. Storm wondered if he was subtly bringing his powers of mesmerism to bear. "Major, you've been ordered to arrest the X-Men because supposedly, one of their number is a murderer, and has announced repeatedly that her comrades were about to lend their hands to the ongoing slaughter, although you'll notice that in point of fact, they never did. Suppose I prove to your satisfaction that the killer is not Rogue. Then would you be willing to release us to track down the threat that Cyclops spoke of? It literally is a menace to the entire human race."

Major Jones hesitated. "How would you prove she's a fake?" she asked at last.

"The first step," said Dracula, "will be to wake her up." He extended his pallid, long-nailed hands, and, grateful to be

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rid of her weight, Ororo handed the impostor over. Supporting the false Rogue in a close embrace, the vampire gazed into her face. "Come back to me, my daughter. It is your sire who calls."

The impostor squirmed sluggishly. Her eyelids fluttered open, and then, when she realized who was clutching her, she goggled in terror.

"You are wise to be afraid," Dracula said mildly. "I'm quite displeased with you."

The impostor thrashed, trying to break free. Dracula's eyes flared red, and she froze in place.

"Change, Carla," said the creature in black. "Show these mortals your true features."

She glared back at him.

"Perhaps you imagine yourself unable to revert," Dracula continued, "even if you would, for I can see that Belasco has done his best to tamper with your fundamental nature. But my blood is not so easily diluted. You can still shapeshift if your maker requires it, and I do. Now *change!*"

The prisoner's—Carla's—flesh oozed like molten wax, the process markedly slower than Dracula's almost instantaneous transformations. Judging by her anguished screams, it was vastly more painful as well. Despite all the hideous things the murderer had done, and despite everything that was at stake, Ororo yearned to end her torture, and judging by the shocked, sickened expressions on the faces of her fellow X-Men, they felt the same. But before anyone quite managed to utter a protest, the white streak melted from Carla's tousled brown hair, and the metamorphosis was done.

The writhing creature in Dracula's hands still resembled Rogue, but even if she hadn't had crimson eyes, fangs, and a vampire's telltale pallor, it would still have been obvious she was a different person. "Voilà," said Dracula, turning her to give Major Jones a better view of her face.

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"My God," said the SAFE agent, "are you and she what I think you are?"

The vampire smiled. "It's better that we not explore that particular topic. It would further complicate an already complex situation."

"Do we have your permission to go about our business?" asked Scott.

Major Jones grimaced. "Well, you did take down the murderer, and it does appear that she isn't Rogue. I also observed that you took pains to avoid seriously injuring any of my people. I'm not one to discount someone's word 'cause of an accident of birth—besides which, anyone who's paid proper attention would know that you folks have done more good than harm for the world. So I think maybe we can work something out." She turned to the men standing behind her. "How's our prisoner?"

"Conscious, ma'am," a sergeant said. "In fact, he says he's fine."

"All right, bring him out and take off the manacles."

Four soldiers escorted a shackled Logan into view. The Canadian's hands and forearms were completely covered by massive, glovelike metal restraints, and he hobbled as if he was in pain, but the soreness was easing by the moment. He grinned at Ororo. "Next time I consider a stunt like that, remind me that I can't fly. Gettin' captured by Magneto is one thing, but this is embarrassing."

"I know about your healing factor," said Major Jones, "but even so, are you sure you should be walking? When my men fished you out of that puddle, you had a concussion, internal injuries, and were nearly drowned to boot."

"A mere bag o' shells, darlin'. Don't believe me, talk to your boss," Wolverine said with a grin, referring to Colonel Sean Morgan, the head of SAFE and a former member of U.S. Army Intelligence. "He and I had a scrape in Yugoslavia once where I came out lookin' a helluva lot worse than this." When

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one of his guards removed the manacles, he instantly reached for a smoke.

Major Jones turned back toward the mutant team leaders, Dracula, and Carla. "What's your next move?" the SAFE agent asked. "Maybe we can support you."

"My disobedient daughter here forsook me to serve a sorcerer called Belasco," said Dracula.

"A sorcerer?" asked Major Jones dubiously. Dracula's mouth tightened at the interruption.

Kitty grinned. "Just say 'super-villain' in your report. It will make life easier all around."

"Carla will now," Dracula continued, "tell us where her new master can be found."

"No!" said Carla, thrashing futilely in the elder vampire's grasp. "I won't! You can't make me!"

Turning to her again, Dracula stared into her eyes. As the seconds dragged by, Carla's snarl gradually changed to a smirk of satisfaction.

"I command you," Dracula gritted. "open your mind to me."

"No," said the prisoner. "When I woke and saw you, it rattled me, and I was still weak from the lightning, and that's how you made me unmask myself. But you can never force me to betray *him*. I belong to him now, not you, never you again!"

Finally Dracula broke eye contact with her and turned toward Storm, something that might almost have been human dismay in his bone-white, arrogant face. "She's right," the vampire said softly, as if it were only to the woman he professed to love that he cared to confess his failure. "Belasco has given her the strength to withstand me."

"But maybe not to withstand me," said Phoenix. "I believe this is my area of expertise even more than yours."

Dracula eyed her appraisingly. "Indeed. Then I will con-

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tinue to apply my powers of coercion to support of your efforts, and we'll see what can be done.''

Jean took a deep breath and let it out slowly, calming herself and focusing her power for the task at hand. Although her talents had served to bring Excalibur and the X-Men together, and to help fend off the federal agents in the battle just concluded, she nonetheless felt that thus far, she hadn't been very useful. This was her chance to redeem herself.

Dracula turned Carla around to face her, and she gazed into the female vampire's eyes. The crimson orbs burned with defiance and an infinite capacity for malice. Jean thrust at them as if her psi powers were a dagger, or their teammate Psylocke's psychic knife, trying to plunge it into the mind behind them.

Her first effort rebounded from a powerful shield. Perhaps because the defense was the product of Belasco's infernal magic, it felt different than any such barrier she'd encountered before. Simply touching it made her wince.

Sensing that Phoenix's attempt had failed, Carla laughed and spat in her face, but if she wanted to see the telepath recoil in disgust, she was disappointed. Already preparing for a second probe, Jean was primarily cognizant of phenomena on the psychic plane. She barely even noticed the glob of saliva, nor did it seem important enough for her to bother wiping it off her cheek. The rain would sluice it away.

She reached for Carla's psyche once again. This time she didn't try to smash through the shield. Instead, unpleasant though it was to touch, she methodically pried at it, searching for holes, seams, and other weak spots. Dracula's power pounded away beside her own, hammering the psychic armor as steadily and relentlessly as a piledriver. His essence was a foul thing too, and she was just as glad that, oriented on Carla as she was, she couldn't perceive it with utter clarity.

She found the relatively vulnerable spots she was seeking.

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They weren't entirely unlike the joints in a suit of metal armor, or the pressure points of the human body. But the shield was so cunningly made that she couldn't get a grip on any of them to yank them open. Finally she withdrew to catch her breath.

Feeling her departure, Carla laughed wildly. "You can't do it, can you? The master is too strong for you!"

"Lady," said Jean, "you couldn't be more wrong."

She hurled herself at Carla's mind a third time, this time in a lightning series of thrusts at the weak spots she'd just identified. Gradually the shield began to resonate, rather the way a bridge shakes if a company of soldiers is foolish enough to march across it in step.

Had Carla been a telepath, trained in psychic combat, she might have been able to manipulate the shield to prevent the stress, like a swordsman deflecting an opponent's cuts in such a way as to keep them from hacking his buckler apart. But as it was, her defense was purely passive, as if she were simply hiding behind a wall, and if attacked properly, any wall can be demolished.

The shield shattered. Carla screamed in pain and rage. For Jean, still primarily perceiving the psychic world, the shrill cry sounded tinny and far away. She regarded the mindscape of thought, emotion, and memory that suddenly unfurled before her, striving to perceive the order in what, as was sometimes the case in the first split second of contact, appeared to be a chaotic jumble.

Then everything imploded, distorting and folding. Crying out in dismay, Jean clutched at Carla's essence, but couldn't hold on to it. In a moment, nothing remained but darkness with a point of crimson light at its center.

The glow expanded, resolving into the image of a man with horns and a pointed tail. A long sword with a golden hilt hung at his side. *Nicely done*, Belasco said, smiling. *Despite all I did to hinder your progress, you and your allies captured Carla, and now you've dissolved the rather potent enchant-*

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ment I wove to protect the contents of her mind. What a pity that all your efforts were in vain.

That, replied Phoenix, remains to be seen. She considered attacking Belasco directly now that they were in some sort of psychic communication, but she suspected that he would never have revealed himself unless confident that she was no threat to him in this particular arena. Instead, as surreptitiously as possible, she groped about in the void, trying to find where he'd hidden Carla's thoughts away from her view.

Belasco chuckled. Spoken like an X-Man. Never say die. Perhaps it won't even daunt you to learn that the true Rogue has succumbed to my blandishments, and is arriving at my sanctuary even as we speak.

Jean could feel that he was telling the truth, and it made her sick with dismay. *It doesn't matter,* she replied, struggling to believe it. *We're still going to stop you, and we're going to save her.*

I can't imagine how, the sorcerer said. *Or wait, perhaps I can. Conceivably you think that I can't abide here inside dear Carla's head, preventing you from riffling her memories, and attend to my business with Rogue at the same time. In point of fact, that's absolutely correct. But unfortunately for you, in a moment it will cease to be a problem.*

My child, Belasco continued, and now Jean could tell that he was addressing Carla, *I gave you more power than your undead form was ever meant to bear. At certain moments it has been a heavy burden, has it not?*

Yes, master, said the vampire from the emptiness. Jean gazed in that direction, reaching, searching, finally spotting another psyche shimmering in the distance . . .

Now, said Belasco, *you may lay your burden down.*

Perhaps at that moment Jean achieved renewed contact with Carla and felt her surge of terror, or perhaps it was only intuition that warned her of what was about to happen. In any

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case, she frantically withdrew her awareness back into her own body and screamed, "Push her away!"

Dracula instantly gave Carla a shove. Phoenix encased the female vampire in a telekinetic bubble an instant before Belasco released all the magic with which he'd imbued her, the awesome reservoir of energy which had made her as strong as Rogue, at once.

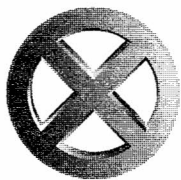
Jean groaned with the strain of containing the explosion. The flash was as blinding and the boom as deafening as Ororo's lightning display, and afterwards, not a trace of Carla remained.

"What happened?" demanded Major Jones.

"Belasco sensed it when I forced my way into her mind," said Jean. "He appeared there himself and killed her to prevent us from finding out where he's hiding."

"Only you got there ahead of him," said Kitty, "so you already *had* found out." She hesitated. "Tell me I'm right."

For a moment, Jean was certain she was going to cry.



CHAPTER 14



Spastic with the pain of her hunger but still as strong as ever, Rogue nearly tore down the tall, weathered church door before finally managing to fumble it open. Whimpering, she staggered through the shadowy vestibule and down the endless length of the nave, toward the scarlet figure standing behind the bloodstained basalt altar.

Smiling, he let her clamber up onto the dais and kneel before him unassisted, but once she did, he traced a symbol on her brow with the claw on his index finger. The hunger abated, and he lifted her to her feet.

"Welcome," he said. "Do you know me?"

She took in the ruddy skin and the horns. For a moment, something about his appearance vaguely alarmed her, but then it was all right. "Yes," she said. "You're Belasco. You're my master."

"Very good," he said. "And you, I think, are at least as much Helen as Rogue now."

She had no idea what he was talking about, and yet she did. Perhaps that division in her mind should have troubled her, but as long as the hunger wasn't twisting her guts, it was easier just to commend herself to his care and not even try to think. "I believe so," she said.

"Look around," he said, gesturing toward the pews. Turning, she took in the pale, gaunt figures peering up at her. She supposed that they'd been there right along, but she'd been so frantic to reach Belasco that she hadn't even noticed them until now.

"See how they envy you your triumph," the sorcerer murmured. "How they now wish that I had chosen them." Rogue studied their intent, burning eyes and saw that it was so.

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They'd always been her rivals for the master's affection, but surely it would never be so again. She grinned at them.

"We've reached the penultimate stage of our work," Belasco continued. "A journey to a realm that no one save myself has seen in living memory. A place where we will silence your thirst forever, and transmute the base metal of your being into something infinitely more precious than gold. Will you accompany me?"

"Yes, angel," she replied. Some of the observers in the nave laughed. She had no idea why, nor did it trouble her.

"Excellent," Belasco said. He drew his sword. Its rune-graven blade shone with a sickly phosphorescence, and, sensing the malignant power whispering in the blade, she had to repress an urge to flinch from it. At some moment in the past, the weapon might have cut her, although she couldn't actually recall the occasion. Closing his black eyes, the horned man reverently kissed the sword, raised it high above his head, and finally touched the point to the altar.

The intricately carved stone rumbled and shuddered as if about to break apart, but instead, it flowed into another form, growing taller and narrower, smoother and blacker, until it resembled a doorway into darkness hanging unsupported in the air. A cold draft blew from the other side.

Metal hissed against metal as Belasco returned his sword to its scabbard. He took Rogue's hand, his talons pricking her skin. "Come," he said, and escorted her through the opening.

On the other side was a path of sorts, a luminous gray ribbon extending through a void which, at first glance, might have been mistaken for outer space, a blackness begemmed with stars and nebulae. But Rogue could still breathe, and the temperature, while markedly colder than in the ruined church, would still have been tolerable even for an ordinary human.

For a moment all was silent, and then a vast rustling sounded in the depths beneath her feet, a noise that made her think of a swarm of cockroaches crawling over and over one

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another. For some reason, it was utterly dreadful, and it froze her in her tracks.

Belasco chuckled. "Don't be afraid. It's only a sampling of the petty devils that infest the spaces between realities. They wouldn't dare attempt to harm the chosen one of the Elder Gods, and I'd scour them from the face of the darkness if they did." As if in response to the threat, the scratching, seething sound subsided. Reassured, Rogue allowed him to escort her onward.

"When you gaze upon the Dark Ones," Belasco continued, "*then* may you rightly cower in fear. I know you've encountered some extraordinary things during your time with the X-Men, but nothing can have prepared you for this. The sheer size of them! The unfathomable intricacy of their forms, and the suffocating aura of their power!"

An opalescent shimmering appeared in the blackness ahead. To Rogue, it looked as if the floating path would lead right up to it.

"But you know," mused the sorcerer, "as awesome as their bodies are, their most profound grandeur lies in the quality of their spirits. They know I adore them. I've spent centuries striving to liberate them, and during all that time have probably represented their only hope of release. The first time I tried and failed to return them to Earth, they punished me by allowing me to languish in suspended animation for centuries. The second, they imprisoned me in Limbo. Still later, when they judged that Illyana would make them a better servant than myself, they immediately stripped me of my power, only restoring it after she spurned them. They're perfect, you see, in a way that we who come from human stock can only dream of. Perfectly devoid of love or mercy. Perfectly selfish, ruthless, and cruel. That purity, the absolute truth of their maleficence, is the most sublime and beautiful thing in all creation."

Somewhere deep inside herself, Rogue thought, *He's com-*

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pletely insane, but the insight didn't trouble her. It was simply a string of words, with no emotion and very little intrinsic meaning attached.

One moment, the shimmer ahead still seemed a long way off, as if they might have to walk for hours to reach it. Then, abruptly, seemingly in the blink of an eye, they were standing directly in front of it. It was made up of thousands of complex, luminous, multicolored designs floating in the air. Rogue vaguely supposed that they must be magical symbols or talismans, crowded so closely together that they seemed to form a solid, three-dimensional structure. With the narrow tunnel leading through the base of it, the glowing rectangular mass reminded her of the barbican of Banshee's castle in Ireland.

"Behold the wards of the thrice-cursed Agamotto," said Belasco. "The locks on the door of the Dark Ones' prison. Tonight we two will break them open."

Rogue felt a dull twinge of curiosity, and perhaps another emotion too fleeting for her even to identify it. "How?" she asked. "And why do you need me?"

Belasco smiled. "Good question. I didn't realize there was still that much intellectual activity inside that poor, ravaged head of yours." They proceeded down the tunnel. "The answer is that like many barriers, Agamotto's prison is stronger on one side than the other. If the Elder Gods were outside it, on Earth, they and I, conjuring together, could dissolve it. The problem being, of course, that they can't get to our world because they're trapped *inside*."

"However, as I studied the X-Men, it occurred to me that a creature like yourself could become the avatar of the Dark Ones. Visit them, take on their personae and powers, and carry them to Earth to serve their needs." Even after she became their vessel, Agamotto's magic would fail to recognize the correspondence, and so have no power to detain her.

"It would have been convenient if I could simply have transformed one of my followers into a suitable tool, but that

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wasn't possible. I knew how to replicate your appearance, your strength, and your power of flight, as I did with dear, martyred Carla, but not your unique form of vampirism. Thus I had no recourse but to enlist you in my cause, and deal with the inevitable complications—your fellow X-Men—as best I could.” He grinned. “Fortunately, I’ve handled them very well indeed, and I trust you’ll agree that the fact they tried and failed to stop us makes our triumph all the sweeter.”

They reached the end of the passage, then stepped into the world beyond.

The first thing Rogue noticed was the choking stench, seemingly consisting of the stinks of every foul, corrosive, or rotting substance known to exist. The second was the heavy liquid noise, suggestive of viscous sludge flowing and dripping, that sounded all around her. The third was the way the ground shifted beneath her boots.

But initially, she could *see* very little, because she seemed to have stepped into a realm of absolute darkness, with no celestial bodies whatsoever shining in the ebon sky. If not for the light of Agamotto’s magic gleaming behind her, she would have been completely blind. Even as it was, it took time for her eyes to adapt sufficiently for her to make out the chaotic jumble of shapes rearing up around her.

At first she took them for hillocks, heaps of refuse, derelict buildings, or a mixture of all three. Only gradually, meanwhile doubting her own perception, did she recognize them as living creatures.

Their shapes were irregular and complex, labyrinthine networks of lumps, maws, and twitching limbs, so much so that it was virtually impossible to tell where one god’s flesh ended and another’s began. Many of them looked raw and ragged, with slimy gaps and gashes in their substance, as if some plague were eating them away. The surface beneath Rogue’s feet shuddered once again, and, looking down, she realized she was standing on one of them, that their sprawling masses

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completely covered the ground. Or perhaps there wasn't any ground, just extensions of their bodies reaching out and out and down and down.

Belasco pointed. "There's Syxra, Mother of Knives," he whispered rapturously. "Zo, Who Makes the Dead Weep. Klejan Kaa, Devourer of Angels and Breaker of Cities. Perhaps now you comprehend how I will end your suffering. For how could you ever hunger again after you've gorged on the essences of beings as full of power as these?"

The sorcerer drew his sword and swung it over his head. Maybe it was his way of paying homage to his deities, or simply of attracting their attention. "Great ones!" he cried. "As I vowed, your hour is at hand. This is the woman who, branded with your shadows, will help me to free you from this dungeon."

Across the landscape of flesh, various organs and protuberances pivoted or oozed in Rogue's direction. Few of them were recognizable as eyes or ears, but they were probably sensory organs of one sort or another.

Now that the Dark Ones were peering at her, she felt their terrible strength, the overwhelming aura Belasco had spoken of, in full measure. In fact, a sudden stab of terror pierced the numbing fog in her head. Crying out, she recoiled.

Belasco laid a comforting hand on her shoulder. "Don't be afraid," he said. "You're about to be blessed as no mortal has ever been blessed before. I'd change places with you in an instant if only I could."

For a moment, her panic abated. Then a hundred arms extended, some tentacular, some forked, some bearing misshapen hands, lamprey mouths, or stranger appendages, all reaching for her, and the fear surged back. Abruptly she didn't care what the master said. She knew in the depths of her being that what was about to happen to her was wrong, vile, a peril that threatened her very soul, and nothing mattered but getting away.

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Spinning, she leapt into the air and flew toward the mouth of the magical tunnel. Masses of flesh enveloped her like huge hands clapping together. She struggled madly, but couldn't break free. The Elder Gods poured their alien minds into her, a tide that dissolved Rogue and Helen alike like a wave of acid. She heard Belasco laugh, and then she was gone.

Magic thrilling up her spine, singing along her nerves, Amanda silently invoked the Muses Under the Mountain: Vala, Who Dreams, Dor, Who Sees, and Ogri, Who Speaks. Tendrils of light sizzled from the Gypsy's fingertips, merging to form a silver oval floating in the air in front of her.

Amanda stared into the mirror, commanding it to show her Belasco. For a moment, shadows swam in its depth, and then it exploded. The tinkling crash sounded exactly like real glass shattering, but the shards melted into nothingness before they reached the floor. The backlash from the unsuccessful conjuration hit her like a punch to the solar plexus. She grunted with the shock, and her knees went rubbery. Kurt sprang to her side and gripped her arm to support her.

The two of them, their comrades, and many of the federal operatives were still at the hospital. Either the facility was underutilized or it had moved out a number of its non-critical patients in expectation of the flood, but in any case, Major Jones had managed to commandeer an empty floor. The X-Men and Dracula were currently lounging about in a relatively small, open ward equipped with blue plastic curtains which could be drawn at need to enclose its dozen beds. The room smelled faintly of ammonia.

Most of her companions did their best to hide their disappointment at Amanda's latest failed divination, but she could read it in their faces even so. Only Jean, psi scanning for Belasco or Rogue herself, her forehead furrowed in concentration, failed to react. It was possible that she hadn't even noticed.

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At that moment, Amanda couldn't stand to have her friends looking at her in all her uselessness. "I need some fresh air," she mumbled. "Then I'll come back and try again." She pulled free of Kurt's grasp and fled through the door into the hallway beyond, a stark institutional corridor with fluorescent lighting and walls painted a pale, unpleasant green.

The door opened once more. As she turned, she expected to see Dracula, but instead it was Kurt. Perhaps the vampire felt that he'd already made his case as effectively as he could, and believed it pointless to remonstrate with her any further.

"Don't be discouraged," said Kurt. "Everything will work out."

She knew he was trying to help, but the remark seemed so blithely out of sync with reality that it annoyed her even so. "How?" she snapped.

"You or Jean will find Belasco. Or if you don't, and he brings the Dark Ones through, then all of us—the X-Men, Excalibur, the Avengers, Spider-Man, and everybody else with peculiar talents and a pair of tights—will team up and chase them back to where they came from."

Amanda shook her head. "You don't understand. Jean and I have been scanning and scrying all day. There's no reason for it to suddenly start working now. What's more, there are dozens of Dark Ones, maybe hundreds, maybe thousands, and they're *gods*, with all that implies. If they ever make it back to Earth, they'll slaughter all us so-called super heroes as easily as you could stamp on a swarm of ants."

"You assume so, but you've never actually seen them. Perhaps legend makes them out to be more formidable than they truly are."

"How I wish I could believe that. But these are primordial entities, beings from the dawn of time, and every mystic knows that such creatures are more powerful than any that arose later. It took Agamotto the All-Seeing himself to cage them, and even he needed trickery and luck. The only way to

deal with them now is to keep the cage locked." She took a deep breath. "Which is why I'd better let Dracula teach me the *Darkhold* magic, and pray that it's not too late already."

Kurt glared at her. "No. I won't permit it."

"It's not your decision."

"Do you truly believe Dracula's assurance that accepting his gift would only change you a little? Because I don't. Remember how often meddling with dark sorcery has nearly destroyed your mother."

"I know it will transform me thoroughly and horribly," Amanda replied somberly. "You could say it's going to kill my soul. But with the whole world at risk, I have to be willing to pay the price."

"Your life belongs to you," Kurt said, taking her hands, "and you have the right to risk it as you and I have done countless times before. But your soul belongs to God, and He forbids you to throw it away, no matter what the reason."

She smiled sadly and squeezed his thick, white-gloved fingers. "I know that's what your faith teaches, darling, just as I know that on one level, it's entirely true. But I'm a sorceress, even if only a puny one whose best trick is simply popping around from place to place. My view of the universe is darker and more complicated than yours. I need you to help me be brave now, and afterward—assuming we're lucky enough to achieve an afterward—to make sure that the Amanda who will take my place doesn't hurt anyone."

Kurt's features twisted in anguish. "I won't—"

The door opened, and Piotr stepped into the hall, his huge shoulders and high, gleaming head a tight fit.

Kurt rounded on him as if the Russian were the cause of all their troubles. "This is a private conversation," the smaller man gritted.

Colossus nodded. "And I think I know what it is a conversation about. The offer that Dracula made to Amanda."

"I'm ordering you," said Kurt, "go back inside."

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"You may be the leader of Excalibur," replied Piotr, "but that doesn't mean you can stop the rest of us from speaking our minds. Amanda, you know how badly I want to find Belasco. I've never wanted anything more. I have to find him, for Illyana's sake."

The sorceress nodded.

"And now we know we have to track him down before the night is out, to save the world. Still . . ." Piotr faltered, then scowling, evidently at his own reluctance, forged ahead. "Still, I've decided I agree with Kurt. I don't want you to use the *Darkhold* magic."

Kurt gaped up at their giant comrade. Amanda suspected she looked just as astonished. It was the last thing that she'd expected Piotr to say.

"You're my friend," Colossus said. "I can't let you poison your spirit. What is the whole human race anyway, except for a collection of spirits? If it's precious enough for us to fight for, then each of its parts must be precious as well. As Kurt said aboard the *Runner*, we must have faith in ourselves. We must believe we'll find another answer."

Amanda felt a knot compounded of guilt, fear, and desperation loosen in her chest. She couldn't quite say how Piotr had managed to convince her when her own lover couldn't, but his words had tipped a balance inside her. "Okay," she sighed, "you two win. No black magic. I just pray that we don't all live to regret it."

Colossus gave Kurt a wry smile. "Do you still wish I'd minded my own business, *tovarisch*?"

Nightcrawler reached up and clapped him on the shoulder. "No, *mein freund*, I do not."

Logan stuck his head out into the hallway. "Break time's over," he growled. "I'm callin' a council of war."

The three members of Excalibur quickly followed him back into the ward. Wolverine strode over to Jean, still sitting more or less entranced on a stool in the nurse's station, put his hand

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on her shoulder, and gave her a gentle shake. "Snap out of it, babe," he said. "We need you, too."

Phoenix blinked and ran her fingers through her tousled auburn hair. "All right. I was about ready to stop for a minute anyway."

"You can stop for longer than that," Logan said. "Amanda's hoodoo and your psi scanning ain't gettin' us anywhere. Maybe it would if we still had a mini-Cerebro to help you zero in on Rogue, but we don't. Our only chance is a fresh approach."

"I've been thinking the same thing," said Scott. As was often the case, he was sitting beside Jean. "But do you have another plan, other than just hunting at random? Because that's not likely to work in the short time we've got left."

"Yup," Logan said. "We got to narrow down the search area, and I'm hopin' we can. Jeannie, you *did* get inside Carla's mind, right?"

"Yes," Phoenix said, "but as I explained, Belasco appeared there a second after I did, and hid her thoughts and memories away from me."

"At least," Logan persisted, "you had that first second. And even afterward, you really were still linked to her mind, weren't you? Belasco only created the illusion that you weren't. Otherwise you would've just been back inside your own skull again."

"Yes," said Jean, frowning thoughtfully, obviously trying to divine where her friend was headed with this, "but how does that help us?"

"I'm guessin'," Logan replied, "that during the time when your minds were hooked together, *something* must have leaked across to you, even if it's buried in your unconscious." He pulled the map of Natchez and the surrounding area from his belt and spread it on top of the Formica counter in front of her.

Everyone else drew closer to see what he meant to do with

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it. Wolverine looked at Storm and said, "No, 'Roro. I don't want you to watch this—yet."

"As you wish," the windrider said, obediently retreating and turning her back.

"Okay," said Logan, orienting on Phoenix once more, "you look at the map and point to Belasco's hideout."

Jean peered at him uncertainly. "You said it yourself. If I acquired any impressions at all from the impostor, they're submerged so deeply—"

"Listen to your intuition," Logan said. "Just trust your gut and give us your best guess."

"You can do it," Kitty said.

"All right." Phoenix stared intently at the map for a time, then hesitantly pointed at the northeast quadrant. "Somewhere in here. Maybe."

"Good," Logan said. "Okay, 'Roro, now you're up."

The willowy black woman turned. "I think I can guess what you have in mind for me. When I was trying to quell the storm, I perceived that it was in some way unnatural, but I didn't know that Belasco's sorcery was responsible. I do know it now, and you're wondering if I can sense at what point the weather-changing influence is rising into the sky."

The Canadian nodded. "Right on the money. Can you?"

"I don't know," Ororo replied. "If the magic was anything resembling a tight beam, or my own power, I would surely have spotted it before. But I'll try."

She took a deep breath, threw back her head, and raised her arms. The air moaned and stirred, playing with the ends of Ororo's hair. Outside, the rain drummed harder for a moment. Lightning flared, followed instantly by a clap of thunder loud enough to rattle the glass in the windows.

Ororo lowered her hands, walked to the counter, and indicated the central area of the northern half of the map. "Like Jean, I can't be sure, but the source of the magic might be

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somewhere in here. Assuming that it is, I may be able to pin it down a little further once I'm up in the open sky."

Nodding, Wolverine picked up a pencil and drew a circle on the map. "You say Belasco's somewhere in here." He sketched a second ring, an arc of which cut through the first. "Jeannie, you say he's around here."

"And the region where the two circles overlap," said Scott, "is where we're going to look."

"Yep," said Logan, "except that we're not done whittling it down yet." To Amanda's surprise, he turned to her. "Your turn, darlin'."

Feeling useless once more, Amanda grimaced. "You've already seen that I can't locate Belasco. His defenses are too strong."

"Yeah, I know," said Wolverine. "The creep out-muscled you. No shame in that, considering how many centuries of practice he's got on you. The thing is, he hasn't taken away your savvy about how magic works, so let's use that. What kind of a place would he choose for his hideout?"

"Somewhere at least a little isolated," Amanda said, pondering, "where there wouldn't be a lot of noise to disturb his concentration. Beyond that . . . ley lines!"

"Those currents of energy that supposedly run through the Earth," said Scott.

"There's no 'supposedly' about it," Amanda replied. "Of course, Belasco's magic primarily comes from the Dark Ones. But *every* sorcerer, whatever other resources he commands, occasionally draws some power from the natural environment to power his spells. And we tend to establish our sanctuaries on or at least near ley lines to make it easier."

"Can you point out the lines in the search area?" Cyclops asked.

"Absolutely," Amanda said, pleased to be asked at last to perform a feat that lay well within her capabilities. "It would help if I had a pendulum."

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"Here," said Dracula, producing the gold and onyx pendant from within his funereal clothing. "You might as well use it for something."

She took it from his pallid hand, the power slumbering inside it tingling up her fingers. Then she drew and exhaled a long, slow breath, centering herself, poised the pendant over the map, and silently bade it reveal what she wanted to know.

Her magic guided her hand an inch farther down the map. The glittering piece of onyx abruptly swept back and forth on its chain, slashing from southwest to northeast and back again.

"You got it!" Kitty said.

"Wait," Amanda replied. "We aren't done yet." The pendant ceased its vigorous, purposeful swinging, and her magic guided her hand almost to the top of the map. The black gem swept back and forth once more, this time defining a line that ran due east and west. When the motion abated, she sensed that the divination had concluded.

"Two lines," said Scott.

"Yes," Amanda said. She handed the pendant back to Dracula before the power inside it, singing to the magic in her own soul, could further tempt her to hang on to it. Judging from his contemptuous smile, he understood exactly what she was feeling. "If they intersected inside the search area, I'd say, look for Belasco at that spot. As it is, all I can tell you is that he may be somewhere along one or the other."

"That's better than we had before," said Logan, drawing the ley lines on the map. He turned to Scott. "That was my last bright idea."

"Then it's time to start the actual search," Cyclops replied.

"What about Major Jones and her people?" asked Kurt.

"Jones seems all right," said Scott, "but she got skeptical when we started talking about the supernatural, and she never actually promised she wouldn't detain us. She's almost certainly been in touch with her superiors by now, and who knows what orders they've given her?"

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"Her superior's Sean Morgan," Wolverine said, "and trust me, if he wanted us detained, we'd know about it by now."

"Fair enough," Scott said with a nod, "but even if SAFE is willing to cooperate with us, they'd only slow us down on the trail, and I doubt that they'd be of much use against Belasco and his vampires when we do find them. So let's sneak out of here and leave them behind."

Logan decided he hated the pounding rain. Not because it battered and chilled him, even though it did. It had washed the city clean. As he prowled down the deserted sidewalk, past a string of antique shops, restaurants, and boutiques, he slipped into one recessed area after another, looking for a patch of pavement or a door handle that was still dry, always to no avail. Even his hypersensitive nose had yet to find a trace of scent.

Periodically he heard the others report over his GCS Unit. Generally, it was to indicate that thus far, they'd come up empty too. Occasionally, however, one of his friends said something so vague and tentative that it was almost more frustrating than when they offered nothing at all. Ororo was *fairly* sure that the epicenter of the weather disruption was east of the river. Looking at a seedy bar, Jean had experienced a powerful sense of *déjà vu*, and *suspected* that Carla might frequently or recently have passed by the same location.

Logan could scarcely believe how quickly the minutes were ticking away, and how slowly the search was progressing—if, indeed, the seekers were truly making progress at all. He'd thought he had some good ideas back in the hospital, but maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe Jeannie, Ororo, and Amanda hadn't had the ability to get the team pointed in the right direction after all. It wasn't like he actually understood how their abilities worked. Maybe the X-Men were miles away from where they needed to be. Maybe the best approach would

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have been simply to let Phoenix and Amanda go on scanning like they were before.

If he'd screwed this operation up, if the Dark Ones came back because of him—

Scowling, he pushed the useless thought out of his mind. Pick an attack, then execute it with confidence and commitment. That was the only way to win any fight, including this one.

Suddenly he caught a whiff of odor, the same familiar yet altered scent he'd detected at the stable. An instant later, it was gone. Sniffing like a bloodhound, casting about, he finally picked it up again. Evidently Rogue had touched down here for a moment and, leaning, pressed her hand against the red door of an insurance office.

Logan quickly dug out and activated his radio. "I found a patch of Rogue's scent up here on Wilson Road," he said. Overhead, lightning blazed, and thunder boomed.

"Acknowledged," Scott replied. "Okay, people, we're giving up on the southern ley line. Everyone who's been searching there, come north."

Wolverine continued up the street. In a stairwell leading down to a basement jazz club, he smelled the putrid funk of a vampire. He reported his discovery to his teammates, then moved on once more.

A minute later, Jean swooped down from the sky. As soon as he saw her face, he knew. "You found it," he said.

"Yes," she said. "Since you suddenly seemed to be having all the luck, I decided it would make sense for me to look around in your vicinity. And as soon as I saw the place—an abandoned church—I simply knew, even though I still can't detect anyone inside."

"Fly me there. I'll keep watch and radio the others while you go pick up Cyke and bring him to the party."

"Okay." She levitated off the wet pavement, then lifted the Canadian in her telekinetic grasp. "Maybe it's silly, con-

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sidering that entire human race is in danger, but now that we've come this far, all I can think about is the argument that almost split us apart. Can we subdue Rogue without hurting her? Can I end the possession? Or are we going to have to strike to kill?"

"If we can knock out Belasco, maybe that'll solve our problems. Guess we'll find out in a few minutes."

When Amanda teleported Piotr into the alley, Logan was perched atop a dented garbage can lighting a cheroot. Across the street stood a dilapidated red brick church, its spacious, overgrown grounds surrounded by a wrought-iron fence. She studied the structure with her mystical senses and detected nothing, but that was peculiar in and of itself. Any place of worship ought to give off at least a faint shimmer of spiritual power, unless someone had wrapped it in some kind of shield.

"Jean's right," she said. "This is Belasco's sanctuary."

"I never doubted it," Logan replied, exhaling pungent smoke, "'specially since I smell more vampire stink in this alley. Still, it's nice to hear that you agree, considerin' that I haven't seen or heard any activity over there."

"Logan, you and I should go in now," said Piotr, rain rattling on his steel body.

The Canadian grinned. "And they call me reckless. Nope, we'll wait on the others. They'll be here soon."

"The door to the Dark Ones' prison could be opening this very instant!"

"If it is, do you think the two of us could fight our way through a bunch of bloodsuckers all by ourselves in time to stop it? Most likely, we'd just get killed and warn Belasco to expect the rest of the gang at the same time. It's better if the whole team goes in together, like Cyke ordered."

"But—"

Logan gazed up at his hulking teammate. "I know how you feel, Petey. I cared about Illyana too, remember? But you

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can't go crazy on us, not with all the chips on the table. We're countin' on you to handle yourself like a pro."

Colossus grimaced. "Very well."

Crouched, his yellow eyes gleaming, Kurt emerged from the darkness. The smell of brimstone indicated that he'd just teleported in. Soon, Phoenix floated down from the sky with Cyclops and Shadowcat in tow. Storm appeared half a minute later, riding a wind that made the rain fly horizontally and blew refuse clattering down the alley. Dracula arrived moments after her, his enormous wings melting into the folds of his cloak even as he landed.

"Let's do it," Cyclops said. Logan unsheathed his claws, and Kurt, his saber.

The team headed across the street, Piotr striding along in front as if it was a struggle not to break into a sprint and leave his companions behind. He effortlessly yanked the wrought-iron gate off its hinges and laid it in the long, wet grass.

They crossed the lawn, then ascended the concrete steps leading to the row of triangular-arched doors in the façade of the church. In another second, they'd be fighting to save the Earth. The prospect was terrifying, and yet, at the same time, it didn't feel quite real. It never did, and Amanda suspected she should be grateful. Perhaps it was that fleeting, dreamlike sensation that gave her the courage to hurl herself into the fray.

Piotr swung his huge, gleaming fist, a gust of wind howled, and Scott's optic blast blazed. All of the doors crashed open at once, and the team strode into the vestibule. More vulnerable to physical assault than many of her companions, Amanda brought up the rear, but even so, her first glimpse of the interior of Belasco's lair was enough to make her gasp in dismay.

As she'd expected, the undead, lean men and women with pale skin and shining eyes, stood or sat about the nave. What she hadn't anticipated was the horde of demons and elemen-

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tals—no two alike, each hideous in its own way—that prowled, crawled, squatted, or hovered there as well. Evidently Belasco's magic had somehow enticed them from their native realms to the physical plane. Perhaps they intended to start jockeying for the favor of the Dark Ones as soon as the deities returned.

Sword in hand, chanting, Belasco himself stood in the desecrated apse, behind a bloodstained basalt altar flanked by grotesque tentacular statues. A rotting corpse nailed to an inverted cross hung on the wall behind him.

Another chanting figure stood by the left-hand wall midway down the church. Her voice changed from second to second, from a roar to a buzz to a shrill whine, but was never entirely human. Her body was almost equally fluid, constantly oozing and flowing, changing color, putting forth limbs and organs of unknown function, then drawing them in once more. If not for the tattered uniform and shock of brown, white-streaked hair, Amanda might not have recognized the abomination as anything human, let alone her friend Rogue, now manifestly inhabited by the personae of several of the Elder Gods.

Yet none of this, ghastly though it was, was what so alarmed Amanda that she momentarily froze. Rather, she was reacting to the spectacle of the intricate and immensely powerful work of sorcery unfolding beneath the lofty ceiling of the church. A structure of whorls and spindles of radiant energy meshing as precisely and inexorably as the clockwork mechanism of a time bomb. Magic that, in a matter of seconds, would dissolve Agamotto's wards.

Amanda had no time to try and devise a proper counter-spell, no time for elaborate gestures or incantations. As the X-Men in the front rank commenced the attack and the foul occupants of the chamber lunged at them, she simply threw the raw force of her will and mystical might at Belasco's construct, commanding it to stop. The structure of light flickered, some of its components twitching out of perfect alignment.

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A jolt of pain, no less excruciating because its source lay on the metaphysical plane, wracked her. If the horned man's ritual resembled a great machine, then her own magic, which was ultimately the stuff of her own soul, was now like a foreign object caught in the gears.

She must have cried out, because an instant later Jean and Kurt were beside her. "What's wrong?" Nightcrawler asked.

"Belasco's magic is almost finished," Amanda said through a clenched jaw. "I can hold it back for a little while, but it's going to do its job unless the rest of you take him down—and Rogue, too. She's got the spirits of several of the Dark Ones inside her and she's helping him conjure, not that they really even have to do that anymore. At this point, their will power alone is enough to drive the spell to completion."

"Understood," Jean said. "I'll tell the others telepathically. But you can't defend yourself, can you? Someone—"

"Kurt and I will guard her," said Kitty, trotting up to position herself in front of Amanda, her uniform already torn and a bloody gash on her shoulder. "Go help Rogue."

Phoenix levitated and flew into the nave.

The intruders advanced, and, shouting, baying, roaring, and gibbering, Belasco's followers surged to meet them. Some of the X-Men were driven back toward the vestibule at once, but not Piotr. He marched down the aisle like a tank, smashing aside a female vampire; a reeking, biting creature resembling a leprous, two-headed harpy; and an immense black hornet with faceted eyes that almost hypnotized him before he managed to wrench his gaze away.

Jean's telepathic voice spoke inside his head, warning that both Belasco and Rogue had to be neutralized, and quickly. *I'll get Belasco, Piotr thought. I promise I will, Illyana.*

Above his head, Ororo darted this way and that. She was obviously trying for a clear shot at Belasco, but flying demons and vampires did their best to interpose themselves between

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the mutant and her intended target. Finally the wind shrieked, momentarily clearing a path through the air. Storm extended her hand. Sneering, Belasco flicked his sword in a casual gesture. When her lightning leapt at him, an oval shield of scarlet light popped into existence to block it. The magician's minions assailed Ororo anew, driving her back.

From the corner of his eye, Piotr glimpsed coiling strands of pearly vapor drifting along the base of the right-hand wall. It was Dracula in his mist form, and the Russian had to admire his sense of tactics. In that insubstantial, relatively inconspicuous shape, the vampire should be able to reach Belasco without having to batter his way through the latter's pet monsters. Indeed, in the chaos of the battle, they might not even notice him.

Unfortunately, when Dracula was halfway up the nave, Belasco himself did sense his enemy's approach. Suddenly pivoting in the vampire's direction, he murmured a brief incantation and pointed his sword at him. The strands of mist twisted together, thickened, darkened, and in an instant became Dracula's solid human body. The lord of the undead collapsed, thrashing as if he were having an epileptic seizure. A creature like an ape with the scales and head of a reptile immediately pounced on him.

Another vampire, this one an adolescent with shoulder-length yellow hair, sprang at Piotr with fangs bared. The Russian grabbed him and threw him across the church. Then a demon a head taller and even more massive than himself appeared to block his path.

Ponderous as its crudely formed body appeared, the creature moved fluidly, as if it were made not simply of dully glowing orange stone but of magma. And as it strode closer, Colossus felt the fierce heat coming off it, just as he noticed the trail of smoldering footprints it branded into the floor.

Piotr hurled himself at the demon, driving his first punch into its chest and the second into its faceless lump of a head.

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His metal fists bashed dents in the demon's substance, but failed to slow its advance. The monster threw its arms around him, hoisted him off his feet, and then collapsed on top of him.

Its weight couldn't crush him, nor was the pressure of its arms likely to do so, in and of themselves. But buried beneath it, he felt the heat of its body soaking into his own. It didn't quite hurt yet, but the pain would come soon enough, as his steel flesh softened into something that his adversary could flatten or rip apart.

Piotr struggled frantically, striking, shoving, gouging, twisting, using every jujitsu, wrestling, and street-fighting move that anyone had ever taught him. Meanwhile, his shirt charred away, and a hot ache like a sunburn spread across his chest and face. Finally he managed to loosen the demon's embrace and squirm free.

The creature immediately attempted to grab him again. He narrowly avoided its clutching hand and scrambled to his feet. The demon rose as well.

He couldn't let it grapple him a second time, which meant that he couldn't get close enough to pound on it with his fists. Pivoting, he grabbed the end of one of the pews and jerked it upward.

The long bench broke in the middle, but half of it tore away from the floor, enough to increase his reach by serving as a club. He battered the demon with it.

The wood immediately began to smash apart, a process hastened by the monster's hammering fists. In a matter of seconds, there was nothing left, and though the demon's body was now scarred from head to toe with pits and gouges, it continued to press the attack, seemingly as powerful as before.

Colossus uprooted another section of pew, and, bellowing, slammed it down on the magma creature's head with every iota of his strength. The demon's skull splashed into a spatter of pebbles and droplets of lava. Its body crumpled to the floor.

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Piotr turned back toward the front of the church. The way was momentarily clear before him, and Belasco was leering at him.

"Come on, then," said the sorcerer, his soft, mocking voice somehow audible despite the cacophony of the battle. "This is your chance. Claim your vengeance if you can."

Piotr threw the pew at Belasco, then instantly charged. The warlock would have to avoid the missile somehow, and perhaps that would buy Colossus the time he needed to get on top of him.

But the hurtling bench simply vanished when Piotr was still several yards from the altar. Belasco said, "Break him." A seething orb of shadow appeared in the air in front of him then, flying low, leapt at the mutant.

Piotr dodged, a split second too slow. The magic projectile smashed into his shin, producing a burst of pain and knocking him down. He tried to leap up, but could only flounder helplessly. Evidently the attack had broken his leg.

"So much for your vow to poor little Illyana," Belasco said. Half a dozen of his inhuman followers surged at Colossus.

One hard-won step at a time, Scott, Logan, and Jean battled their way toward Rogue. Cyclops fired his optic blast again and again, as quickly as he could, battering one gibbering devil or hissing vampire after another. Crouched, pivoting this way and that, Wolverine slashed at any adversary who managed to lunge close enough. Hovering above their heads, Phoenix attacked Belasco's flying servants with mental bolts and her telekinesis.

So far, Scott knew, they were at least holding their own, but he wondered just how long they could keep it up. He only had a finite reserve of solar energy to drive his mutant power. He very seldom exhausted it, but it had been known to happen. Jean's psi could run out of steam as well. Even Logan, with

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his extraordinary metabolism, wore himself out occasionally. And as soon as any one of them faltered, this army of horrors might well take them all down.

Don't think about it, he told himself. Just do your job.

Another optic blast slammed a vampire in lupine form into a demon resembling a huge, six-legged panther, then smashed the both of them into the wall. With the creatures out of the way, he had a clear shot at the flowing, chancrous thing that Rogue had become. Regretting the necessity, but without hesitation, he fired at her.

The scarlet ray had no visible effect. Frowning, he fired several more. By the end, he was discharging the most devastating blasts of which he was capable, still without even knocking Rogue off her feet.

Grimacing, he went back to fighting Belasco's minions and helping his teammates maneuver into position to attempt to deal with Rogue. Finally they drew close enough for Wolverine to cut a final trio of demons out of his way, then dart in and attack the possessed woman herself.

His adamantium claws rang against her body, further shredding her uniform but not even nicking the squirming chameleon skin beneath. Tentacles erupted from her face and shot at him. Dodging them with uncanny grace and speed, he attacked even more savagely than before, but again to no avail. Still chanting, Rogue swung her right arm in a backhanded blow, and he hopped back just far enough to avoid it. But the limb lengthened in midsweep, catching him by surprise. Rogue would surely have tagged him and drained his vitality if Jean hadn't snatched him back with her psychokinesis.

"Our big argument was for nothin'," growled Wolverine, gutting a triple-horned devil that had been slinking in on Scott's flank. "With the Elder Gods inside her, we couldn't kill her even if we were willing to try."

Then it's up to me, said Jean, speaking mind to mind. *Cover me.*

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She stunned a snarling, gray-winged vampire with a mental bolt, tumbling it from the air and out of her way. That accomplished, she melted away the unstable molecules of her glove, dove at Rogue, and deliberately pressed her fingers against the possessed woman's heaving, flowing face.

Rogue stopped chanting and stumbled backward. Jean collapsed in a heap at her feet. At once, more of Belasco's servants lunged at her.

Scott frantically bashed them backward with a high-speed succession of optic blasts. Under the cover of the barrage, Logan sprang forward, snatched Jean up, carried her away from Rogue and over to Cyclops, and set her on the floor again. Standing over her, the two men fought madly to hold the onrushing monsters back.

Scott couldn't tell if his wife was breathing, and their mind link had gone dead. He tried not to think about the fact that he and Wolverine could well be defending a corpse.

Kitty smiled, because the next demon that charged her had a long spear with a razor-edged, gleaming black head that resembled polished obsidian. Right at the moment, as the superficial wound she'd already sustained demonstrated, she was in urgent need of a weapon. She brushed the point aside with a *geden-barai* downward sweep, then waited a split second for the toadlike creature's own momentum to bring it into striking range. As soon as it did, she snapped punches at its bulging orange eyes.

The demon squealed and stumbled. Shadowcat grabbed the shaft of the spear, wrenched the weapon from her attacker's webbed fingers, and used it to club the thing. That knocked it reeling backward far enough for her to drive the business end of the lance deep into its thorax. The devil melted into a torrent of slime.

Somewhere deep inside herself, the part of her that was still just a girl from Deerfield, Illinois and not a battle-hardened

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bujin winced. Ordinarily she hated killing or maiming anything. But when she was up against monsters from hell, and the whole world was in danger, she was willing to make an exception.

Lifting the spear into a high guard, she pivoted toward the front of the church, just in time to meet the attack of two more demons, one resembling an immense, buzzing mosquito and the other, a headless man with a leering, cackling madman's face in the center of his chest.

From that point on, the pressure never let up. Her mind calm, her actions flowing without conscious thought, Kitty spun in an intricate circular dance, stabbing, cutting, parrying, and sweeping, drawing on everything she knew of the ways of the *yari*, the *naginata*, and the *bo*. Periodically, some hideous thing would leap inside her guard, and she'd phase to avoid its rending talons or snapping jaws, but she couldn't do it often or remain a wraith for longer than a second. Because when she was intangible, she couldn't hold the monsters away from Amanda.

Beside her, Kurt cut and thrust with his saber, and tripped his opponents by grabbing their ankles with his tail. Sometimes he parried their blows. Sometimes he evaded them with somersaults, flips, rolls, and prodigious leaps that might leave him clinging momentarily to the wall. Sometimes he teleported out of harm's way with a muffled report and a burst of sulfurous smoke. But like Kitty, he couldn't be as mobile as he no doubt would have preferred, for fear of exposing his lover to an attack.

A gigantic white centipede reared at Shadowcat, its serrated mandibles gnashing. It swayed aside to dodge her first thrust, and by the time she scored with her second, a gray, skeletal thing with eye sockets full of fire was lunging at her with a curved dagger in each withered hand.

She phased to avoid the blades, started to pivot and swing the spear into line for an attack, and then twin bolts of flame

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leapt from her foe's fleshless countenance, struck her, blistered her, and knocked her down. The skeleton pounced at her.

The demon's own ability to phase had taken her completely by surprise, but her trained reflexes saved her. Rolling, she narrowly avoided the skeletal creature's knives, which plunged without resistance into the floor. They both scrambled up, but she was a split second quicker, and snapped the devil's skull from its spine with a horizontal slash of the spear.

Yet even as she did so, she saw that she'd remained intangible too long. Other monsters were closing in on Amanda. Becoming solid, she engaged two of them, then glimpsed the billowing gray mist at the sorceress's feet. The strands of vapor swirled upward and became a gaunt, shaven-headed, red-eyed young man with rings in his pointed ear. He bared his fangs and reached for the Gypsy's throat.

Shadowcat drove her opponents back a pace with a sweep of the spear, then spun around to help her friend, already knowing that she was going to be too late. Battling a blue woman whose body appeared to be made of countless tiny, cheeping homunculi clinging together, Kurt had his back to Amanda and evidently hadn't even seen the danger. This, then, was the moment that Kitty sometimes had nightmares about, the moment when the X-Men were finally going to lose.

His cloak in tatters, Dracula sprang from the gloom, grabbed his rebellious offspring by the shoulder, spun him around, and drove a piece of splintered wood into his breast. The other vampire collapsed.

Whirling once more, Kitty was only barely in time to parry the strikes of the creatures that were lunging at her. As it was, the blows sent her stumbling backward, but Dracula leapt forward to confront her attackers and so bought her the time to recover her balance. Fighting side by side, they dispatched those monsters and engaged the ones that instantly took their place.

"No one has been able to reach Belasco," said Dracula,

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paralyzing a creature that looked like a diseased, hairless centaur with his hypnotic gaze, then striking it a savage blow to the neck.

"Maybe I can if I phase," panted Kitty, thrusting with the spear.

"No," said Nightcrawler. "Your power doesn't protect you from magic. Belasco would zap you before you got to him. It will have to be me." Shadowcat could imagine just how reluctant he was to abandon Amanda, but she couldn't have guessed it from his level tone. "You two keep the lid on here."

He feinted a head cut, drove his point into the chest of the scaly horror before him, and then, with a bamf and a puff of smoke, he was gone.

Kurt teleported in behind Belasco, materializing in the shadow of the inverted cross and its grisly, foul-smelling burden. One surprise attack, one stab in the back, and this part of the fight could be over. Scarcely the most swashbuckling of tactics, but occasionally even a disciple of Zorro and Captain Blood had to bow to expedience, and considering what was at stake, and the sorcerer's awesome power, this was surely one of those times.

He lunged, and though he hadn't made a sound, Belasco turned smoothly and blocked his attack with a parry. When their swords clanged together, Kurt felt a slight but repellent shock, no doubt a manifestation of the evil magic locked in the sorcerer's phosphorescent blade.

"Hello, Wagner," said the leering horned man. "Have you come to beg for mercy? To plead to be my slave? Even now, it's not too late."

Kurt lashed out with a head cut. Once again, Belasco parried.

"Poor, deluded little goblin," the warlock said mockingly.

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“Rejecting your own true nature. Spurning paradise. But never fear, I’ll save you from your folly.”

Nightcrawler feinted another head cut, then rotated his wrist ninety degrees for a strike at the flank. But as he did, his eyes met Belasco’s.

Suddenly the mutant felt a ghastly shifting and churning in the depths of his psyche, like a convulsion in the depths of the earth forcing something that had been buried for eons to the surface. He tried to finish his attack, but his sword arm, like the rest of his body, was numb and dead.

For an instant, Jean didn’t remember where she was. Something—her surroundings themselves?—gnawed and pried at her.

Reflexively she shoved the attacking forces back, realizing as she did so that she was now a creature of pure psychic energy and a dweller inside Rogue’s mind. The forces nibbling and tugging at her were that psyche’s automatic, unconscious efforts to merge her with the whole. Had they succeeded, they might have robbed her of her ability to operate as an autonomous entity, or at least addled her to the point that she no longer recalled why she’d re-created herself here.

Fortunately, as a trained telepath, accustomed to walking in other people’s heads, she should be able to resist any degree of assimilation—for a while anyway. The fact that Rogue’s powers had already been subverted and altered helped her resist as well. Turning, she gazed about to orient herself.

Not that she was physically turning, of course, or peering through a pair of eyes. The landscape and her body alike were symbols, forms her imagination spontaneously generated to make the abstract realities of the psychic domain easier to grasp. But for all intents and purposes, she found herself standing on a cratered, barren plain beneath a moonless, starless sky. From somewhere shone a bare trace of light, just enough to reveal the several mountains rising from the flatness of the

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wasteland. A horrible miasma, seemingly compounded of a variety of foul stench, hung in the air.

After a moment something made a thick, liquid sound. Pivoting in that direction, Phoenix saw the nearest of the mountains quake and change shape. First it slumped lower, as if it was melting, and then three thick, writhing appendages sprouted from its right side. Only then did she realize that the immense mounds were the psychic representations of the Elder Gods themselves.

She waited tensely for a moment, but the colossal thing didn't attack. Evidently it had shifted and grown its tentacles for some reason that had nothing to do with her. Resolving to keep a wary eye on it and its fellows too, she levitated into the air.

As she flew across the blighted plain, she heard sobbing and whimpering, and swooped lower to investigate. Cowering in certain of its the pits and declivities lay the withered, faded simulacra of people whose essences Rogue had at one time or another absorbed. Many of them were so tattered and blurred that Jean couldn't even recognize them. But she did spot the Magus, the intricate black and yellow pieces of his techno-organic body broken apart, and Captain America, his shield crumpled, his shrunken frame all but lost inside the folds of his red, white, and blue uniform.

In yet another crater crouched a thin, pale, prim-looking woman in dowdy clothes. Phoenix just had time to notice that she didn't look as ravaged as the other doppelgängers when the woman snarled and, crimson eyes shining, clawed hands extended, hurtled up at her.

Caught by surprise, Jean narrowly dodged that first attack. Instantly the vampire wheeled to fly at her once more. This was evidently the avatar of the servant Belasco had used to poison Rogue, a creature he'd enchanted to enable her to thrive and exert power on the psychic plane.

Come on, then, thought Jean. I'll show you the difference

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between a real psi and a fake enhanced with a little hocus pocus. She put her hand behind her back where the vampire couldn't see it, and a manifestation of her intent materialized inside her fingers.

Her adversary flew at her, and she blasted the undead thing with a mental bolt. Momentarily stunned, the vampire floundered in the air, and Jean dodged once again.

Baring her fangs, the vampire gazed into Phoenix's eyes. The telepath could feel the other woman's hypnotic power pounding at her, but her shields held. She didn't counterattack, just shook her head and gave her foe a scornful, pitying smile.

Shrieking in fury, the vampire charged her a third time. Jean waited until she was nearly on top of her, then threw the object in her hand, guiding it with her telekinesis, or what passed for it in this realm of pure mind.

Belasco's minion pivoted and began to dive, and for an instant Jean was afraid that, close as she was, she was still going to manage to dodge. Then the wooden stake punched into the vampire's chest, and her body exploded in a shower of dust.

Jean looked about. She'd hoped that the undead woman's demise would produce some encouraging change in the mind-scape around her, but no such luck. Although the vampire had been the original source of Rogue's difficulties, her subsequent possession by the Dark Ones was so overwhelming that it rendered all other sources of psychic pollution irrelevant.

The telepath flew on, searching, wondering just how quickly time was passing in the physical world, until at last she spotted the deepest opening yet, a shaft descending deep in the rocky, sterile ground. Following her instincts—no doubt Logan would approve—she dove into it head first.

Almost immediately she plunged into total darkness, and willed a glow into existence to light her way. And it was a good thing she had, because farther down, the passage began

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to twist and narrow. Had she been unable to see where she was going, she might easily have bashed her head open.

Soon the way was so cramped that she felt as if she were crawling rather than flying, and wondered if she might get stuck. But then, after a final bend that changed the passage's attitude from vertical to horizontal, it opened out into a claustrophobic little bell jar of a cave.

Here Rogue lay curled in the fetal position on the cold stone floor, looking as blurry and insubstantial as any of the psychic constructs weeping and shuddering above her head. Her gloveless hands were covered in blood, and the coppery smell of it suffused the air. For an instant Jean wondered if her fellow X-Man was comatose, but then, seeing the light, Rogue gasped and flinched.

"Don't be afraid," said Phoenix. "It's me, Jean. I've come to help you." She knelt beside Rogue and took her friend's hands in her own.

"I'm so sorry," the possessed woman whispered.

"Don't be," Jean said. "Belasco hasn't opened the Dark Ones' prison yet." At least she hoped not. "We can still stop him."

"You don't understand," said Rogue, tears slipping from her eyes. "I don't have any control. You're only here because I killed you."

"No," said Jean. "I'm here in your mind because I came in of my own free will."

"Killed you, Scott, Logan, Ororo, and God knows how many others," continued Rogue as if she hadn't heard.

"You're wrong," insisted Phoenix, staring intently into her friend's emerald eyes and gripping her fingers. "Belasco had someone impersonate you and murder people, but I promise, you didn't kill anyone. If it seemed otherwise, it's only because he lied to you and tricked you."

Rogue blinked. "Really?" she asked in a tiny, childlike voice.

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“Really. You fought your cravings every inch of the way, and you held out.” The gore evaporated from Rogue’s hands. “I need you to keep on fighting now. I got rid of the vampire for you, but the Elder Gods are still squatting up there on the surface making their magic. We have to work together to banish them. They have way too much psychic energy bound up in them for me to do it alone.”

“I—I don’t know if I can,” Rogue said. “They didn’t touch you, did they? They’re even stronger than you think they are. Stronger than you can imagine.”

Ordinarily it was useful to cloak the mindscape in forms derived from the material world, but there was a time to dispense with the pretense as well, and Phoenix judged that this was it. She willed her surroundings to become what they truly were, intricate patterns of energy, then established a mind link that enabled her to share the vision with Rogue. The other mutant gasped.

“You see?” asked Jean. “The rock around us, the air we’re breathing, and everything else you were seeing and feeling is simply a kind of illusion. A spectacle we’re creating for ourselves. In reality, it’s all just a part of your own thoughts. Your own mind. Even I’m not the genuine, original Jean. I’m just a facsimile your absorption power generated using the energy and the pattern the true Jean gave it.” She tried not to dwell on the possibility that her counterpart had died as a result, or that one of Belasco’s minions had torn her apart as she lay helpless.

“I guess I understand,” said Rogue slowly, as matrices of energy became dank stone walls once more. “Even with Helen gone, it’s so hard to think.”

“I know,” said Jean. “That’s because so much of your psychic force is tied up in those ugly lumps upstairs. But the main thing to understand is that just as I’m not the original Jean, they aren’t the real Elder Gods, either. They’re a part of you too. A pattern *you* wove and can unravel again.”

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“How?”

“With my help,” said Jean, trying to sound confident. “I’m a psi, remember? Manipulating mental forces is what I do. I’ve never been able to manipulate yours very well before, but now that I’m actually living inside your mind, I’m in a better position to do so. When we go after the Dark Ones, I’ll feed you power, and help you direct your attacks for maximum effect.”

“But how do we fight them?”

“Do whatever feels right. You can punch them just like you would a physical foe. Or use your imagination. Visualize lightning bolts blasting them, or something like that. Or simply will them to disappear. Whatever you do, believe that they’re only a facet of yourself, and that one portion has no power to destroy or dominate the whole. Your faith will weaken them and strengthen both of us.”

“Can I absorb them?”

“Since in reality, you’ve already absorbed them, no, unless, perhaps, you make a conscious effort. And I don’t recommend that. We definitely don’t need you running off yet another copy of an Elder God on an even deeper level of your psyche. Are you ready?”

Rogue took a deep breath and gave a jerky little nod. “I guess so.”

“Good,” Jean answered. “Let’s do it.”

She led Rogue back up the shaft, noticing that it was now wider and straighter than when she’d descended. In fact, before long it opened out into a wide pit, permitting the two X-Men to fly side by side. Presumably the terrain was shifting because Rogue no longer felt she needed a hiding place.

Even so, the possessed woman hesitated for a moment when they rose above ground level, and the enormous, squirming masses of the Dark Ones came into view. Once again, Jean showed her the reality behind the façade, dissolving the intricate, festering things into constructs of force, mere sub-

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patterns in the grand design that was the mindscape as a whole—albeit subpatterns containing a prodigious amount of power.

“You see?” said the telepath. “They’re just pale shadows of the originals. Those spiral nodes are weak points.”

“Got it,” said Rogue. She clenched her fists, extended her arms, and rocketed at the nearest Dark One like an artillery shell.

Jean peered behind the illusion of the other woman’s avatar, viewing it too as a structure of pure psychic force. After an instant of analysis, she infused her friend with a measure of her psi energy, lending her additional strength and shoring up a weak spot in the matrix.

The living mountain didn’t even try to fend Rogue off. Perhaps it was so busy with opening the gate to the prison dimension that it didn’t even notice her coming. She slammed into it with an enormous thud, and an instant later plunged all the way out the other side, propelling raw wet chunks of the Elder God’s substance before her. The huge creature formed a hundred mouths, which shrieked, howled, and roared at once. Rogue wheeled for another pass.

Jean turned and hurled a sort of mental bolt at a second Dark One, willing it to cease to exist. Even though her attack caught it squarely in the vulnerable spot at the center of its writhing, chaotic mass, that first effort did little more than attract its attention. Suddenly it was sliding across the plain toward her with appalling speed, like the bullet trains she’d seen in Japan streaking down their tracks.

She flew upward, trying to rise beyond its reach, and it stretched like taffy to follow. Countless limbs erupted from its surface, flailing and clutching at her. Fending them off as best she could with a telekinetic shield, she struck at the Dark One’s weak point again, this time using every iota of her strength.

She grunted with the strain, and her shield failed. Tentacles

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lashed at her. But before they could smash her to pulp, the deity turned to stone, which instantly shattered into tiny pieces. Once the clattering rain of gravel hit the ground, it was all but indistinguishable from the surrounding landscape.

Jean looked about. Rogue's first adversary lay scattered across the plain in a vast sheet of slime and filth. As a result of the two X-Men's victories, the possessed woman's ghostly form had taken on substance and definition. But now, raging in countless inhuman voices, the other four Elder Gods were converging on their assailants. Which meant no more surprise attacks, and no more dealing with the deities one at a time, either.

As their training dictated, Jean and Rogue took up positions hovering back to back. Theoretically, that should have protected them from attacks from the rear, but with the Elder Gods' scores of tentacles twisting and whipping in all directions, it scarcely helped at all. Phoenix dodged madly, flung up one psychokinetic barrier after another, meanwhile thrusting repeatedly with her telepathy. At last she stabbed through a second god's armor. This time, the immense thing simply vanished, present one second and gone the next.

The lethal strike had required a supreme effort, and perhaps it had slowed Jean down. Or perhaps she simply wasn't expecting an attack at range, since up to now, the Dark Ones had only tried to smash or grab her with their limbs. At any rate, when the blasts of blue flame erupted from another deity's ragged, oozing sores, she failed to throw up a shield in time.

The fire seared her, stunned her, and started her tumbling in free fall. She struggled to focus her power anew, to pull up and fly, and then two colossal appendages—one a slate-gray flipper, the other a mottled, chancrous, three-fingered hand—clapped shut around her and squeezed.

The impact was agonizing, and the pressure, irresistible. Knowing she was finished, she reached out for Rogue's mind

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and bequeathed her all that remained of her strength. An instant later she was gone.

Rogue darted this way and that, blasting the Elder Gods with dazzling, crackling lightning bolts. In the real world, she knew, enough time had elapsed that she probably no longer possessed Ororo's powers. But in the universe of her own mind, if she could imagine something, she could do it, just as Jean had promised.

After all the anguish, bewilderment, and humiliation she'd endured, it felt glorious to be herself again, to lash out at the forces that had done their best to break her and make her their tool. And by God, even though she was rapidly tiring, she and Jean were going to beat them. Between them, they'd already accounted for three of the living mountains, and unless she was mistaken, this fourth one was about to—

A sudden surge of energy infused her with fresh strength. She experienced a fleeting impression of iron resolution and excruciating pain, and then her mindlink with Phoenix dissolved. Which could only mean that the other X-Man had been destroyed. Snarling, Rogue hurled yet another electrical discharge.

But now, despite her augmented power, the tide of battle turned inexorably against her. With Jean gone, it became steadily more difficult to shift her perception, view the Elder Gods as patterns of energy, and so determine their weak points. Moreover, she soon began to tire again. And worst of all, now that it was three against one, she had to struggle so frantically to avoid the monsters' ceaseless attacks that it was frequently impossible to strike back at all.

The colossal horrors sprouted new sets of mouths, which for once all cried in unison, in human speech. "Give up, slave! You cannot win! You belong to us now!"

Like hell I do! thought Rogue, zigzagging at top speed to avoid three sets of huge, clacking chelae and then a blue ray

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that, judging by the chill it spread through the air, was evidently intended to freeze her. There had to be a way to pull this off. If only the monsters hadn't nailed Jean. If only she weren't now so badly outnumbered!

Then it occurred to her that even with Phoenix gone, perhaps she didn't have to be outnumbered if she wished it otherwise, not if the only limit to her powers was her own willpower and imagination. "Come help me!" she shouted.

For a moment, nothing happened. Her heart sank, and the Dark Ones seemed to loom even huger. Then all the human psychic ghosts she'd absorbed over the years emerged from their hiding places in the pits and craters. Like herself, they'd derived strength and substance from the demise of the first three Elder Gods. Enough so that, although many still looked haggard and faded, they were ready to fight.

Captain America's shield, intact once more, whirled through the air, struck the flank of a Dark One, bounced, hit a second one, and rebounded into his red-gloved hand. Nightcrawler attacked with his fists, Storm, her lightning, and the Magus, his strength. Colossus picked up Wolverine and threw him in the maneuver they called a fastball special; landing atop one of the malignant deities, the Canadian slashed it with his claws. The hulking Juggernaut tore chunks of flesh from its base, and Shadowcat phased through their attacks, distracting them long enough for Professor Xavier to strike them with psionic bolts. Spiral spun her six arms in an intricate pattern, casting a spell, while the Human Torch threw balls of fire at the evil deities. Even Cody, still the slender blond boy whose life Rogue had stolen rather than the emaciated man who'd died in her arms years later, battered one of the titanic horrors with a rock.

Rogue now felt the strength leaving her body at an appalling rate. As she'd once drained these phantoms of their vitality, so now they were siphoning hers to power their assault. But judging by the damage they were inflicting, and the way

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the Elder Gods were thrashing and bellowing in pain and alarm, these avatars of her victims also represented her best hope of ending her possession.

Concentrating fiercely, she managed to view the Dark Ones as energy constructs one last time, then hurled thunderbolts at their vulnerable points. "Hit them where I'm hitting them!" she cried, and her army did its best to obey. She started ramming the monstrosities in a series of kamikaze dives, smashing into them with every bit of her waning strength and speed, heedless of whatever damage she might be doing to herself in the process.

Veering back and forth, she slipped through a writhing maze of tentacles and crashed squarely into a Dark One's weak spot, an organ that currently resembled a squirming, rotting yellow rose. The deity exploded in a dazzling flash, and the force of the blast slammed into her and hurled her backward. Stunned, she plummeted toward the ground.

As she fell, the two remaining Elder Gods perished, one in a second explosion, the other imploding, crumbling in on itself until, an instant later, not a trace of it remained. Then she hit the ground.

Or rather . . . the floor? Dazed, she realized her awareness was back in the material world. Back in her real body, not just a psychic simulation of it. Her flesh writhed and flowed as it shed the deformities her possession had imposed on it.

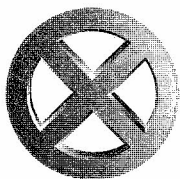
Jean lay beside her. Scott and Logan stood over the two of them, fighting to hold off a horde of demons. Belasco confronted Kurt—how had *he* gotten involved in this?—behind a bloodstained altar, and under the lofty ceiling, the physical manifestation of a powerful magic pulsed and shimmered.

Rogue guessed that as long as Belasco was still functional, the spell that he and the Elder Gods had woven in concert was still going to proceed to its ghastly conclusion. No problem. She couldn't think of anything she'd rather do than help Kurt

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make the sorcerer nonfunctional. “Payback time, sugar,” she whispered, and tried to draw herself to her feet.

It was only when that effort failed that she felt just how terribly the battle to expel the Dark Ones from her psyche had drained her. Her head spun, and she struggled desperately to hold onto consciousness, but it slipped away from her anyway.



CHAPTER 15



For a split second more, the depths of Kurt's psyche writhed, and then the sensation passed, leaving him unchanged and free to act. "I keep telling you," he said to Belasco, grinning, "you have me confused with someone else." He completed the cut to the flank.

Caught by surprise, Belasco only barely managed to parry. "So be it, then," the sorcerer said. "In that case, you'll simply have to die." He swung his glowing sword in a cut at Kurt's knee.

The mutant leapt over the stroke, aimed his saber for a slash at Belasco's chest, and then something warned him that his adversary's sword stroke had been a sort of feint. Instead of following through on his intent to attack, the X-Man teleported three feet to the right.

A blaze of crackling azure fire ripped through the space he'd occupied only a moment before. Evidently Belasco could fence and cast spells at the same time.

Determined to end the fight before the horned man could draw a bead on him anew, Nightcrawler teleported again while still in midleap. Materializing behind Belasco, he lunged the instant his two-toed feet touched the floor.

As before, the man in red sensed the threat, and, his cloak swirling, pivoted to meet it, but this time, he was a shade too slow. Kurt's saber plunged against his chest, slashed the silken fabric of his tunic, and, ringing, rebounded from his ruddy chest, leaving it unmarked. Nightcrawler stared, aghast, and Belasco chuckled.

"I'm afraid I'm all but indestructible," the sorcerer said, "like dear little Rogue. A gift of the Elder Gods. Perhaps with luck, one of your more powerful comrades could harm me a

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little, but you, imp? It's really quite unlikely." He twitched the point of his sword, and another magical attack, this one a seething ball made of ragged strands of darkness, popped into existence before him and streaked at his foe.

Kurt dodged it with a somersault, then flung himself into another furious attack. Over the course of the next minute, he cut and thrust at all the most vulnerable points of the human body, striving desperately at least to inflict a wound, always unsuccessfully. He wondered why Belasco was even bothering to parry. He hoped it was because it was at least theoretically possible that he could incapacitate the magician, but perhaps his opponent was simply enjoying the game.

Meanwhile, he didn't dare stop moving for a second. He could parry Belasco's blade—the sorcerer was an able swordsman, but no better than himself—but only by dodging, ducking, and teleporting could he avoid the flares of mystic power that the horned man hurled at him. Before long, he noticed that Belasco's jet-black eyes always narrowed just as he cast a spell, and often, only that warning sign allowed him to displace himself in time to avoid incineration or some other ghastly fate.

As he fought, bounding and flipping back and forth, onto the massive basalt altar and off, teleporting until a haze of sulfurous smoke all but obscured his surroundings, his attention was naturally riveted on Belasco. But even so, he caught glimpses of his comrades. Colossus, virtually buried beneath a pile of demons. Cyclops, blasting a pew into a hail of wooden shrapnel that dispatched three onrushing vampires at once, fighting to protect Jean, Rogue, and the bloody, battered Logan, all three sprawled motionless on the floor. Storm, backed into a corner, now standing as if she could no longer spare the energy to fly, defending herself with howling gusts of wind. Kitty and Dracula, holding a swarm of demons away from Amanda. Each of the mutants—the ones who were still conscious, anyway—battled as fiercely as ever, yet, to the eye

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of someone who knew them as well as Kurt, they were obviously nearing the limits of their strength.

Which meant that Nightcrawler couldn't teleport away, grab one of them, and pop him up here to deal with Belasco. The displacement would leave any of his fellow X-Men too enervated to be of any use. It might even exhaust Dracula, and in any case, the vampire was needed where he was. No, the best Kurt could hope for from his comrades was that they would continue to keep the army of monsters occupied. He'd have to stop the sorcerer himself.

There must be a way, he thought. There was always a way to penetrate an opponent's defense, if a fencer only possessed the wit to see it. But as he failed with one attack after another, either because Belasco blocked them or because they simply couldn't so much as nick his skin, as time and again, he avoided death by a hair, he couldn't think of a thing.

His heart pounded, and the breath rasped in his throat. It wasn't the swordplay or the acrobatics. Strenuous as they were, his trained muscles could have kept them up for far longer, had they been the only demand on his stamina. The problem was too many teleports in too brief a time. Soon he'd slow down, and at that moment, Belasco would no doubt put an end to him.

The structure of magical light above their heads blazed brighter, and even though he was by no stretch of the imagination a mystic, Nightcrawler nonetheless sensed that somewhere, an immense door had begun to swing open. Perhaps every fragile, defenseless human being on the face of the planet was sensing it as well.

Belasco laughed. "You feel it, don't you, Wagner? They're coming. Which means that, amusing as this interlude has been, it's time to end it. I must compose myself to greet the new masters of the world." His eyes narrowed, he flicked the point of his sword, and dark lightning leaped from the blade.

Kurt dodged it with a leap, displaced himself to avoid a

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second crackling bolt, materialized atop the basalt altar, and hacked at the crown of Belasco's head. The sorcerer didn't lift his sword in time to parry, and while the blow didn't cut him, it at least knocked him off balance. Eager to follow up, Nightcrawler sprang from the graven stone block, but, even staggering, Belasco still had command of his sorcery. The mutant had to teleport in midair to save himself from yet another blast of malignant power. By the time he reappeared and wheeled to continue the attack, Belasco had recovered his equilibrium and come back on guard.

For an instant, Nightcrawler felt a surge of despair, but he thrust it from his mind. *There is always a way.* And as he flipped and teleported about Belasco, never still, attacking him from all sides, something caught his eye, and he prayed that perhaps he finally saw his chance.

Three more rapid-fire teleports which, he hoped, would momentarily befuddle his foe, each jump producing a clenching pain in his guts. The third displacement landed him squarely in front of Belasco, who reflexively thrust out his sword. Kurt swept the forte of his blade against the foible of the sorcerer's, then, taking advantage of the leverage the juxtaposition afforded him, spun the other man's weapon in an envelopement.

Unfortunately, such a *prise de fer* was inevitably a slower move than a simple cut or thrust, and afforded Belasco a good opportunity for a sorcerous counterattack. Even as Kurt took control of his sword, the sorcerer rattled off a word of power, and the mutant, unable to complete his action and retreat at the same time, opted for the former. Once he'd torn the enchanted sword from Belasco's ruddy hand and hurled it pinwheeling into the nave, he leapt, but by that time a bolt of silvery light was already streaking at him. The magic caught him in the chest and sent agony shrieking along his nerves. He fell heavily to the floor, and when he tried to scramble up, found that he was paralyzed. He strained for one last teleport,

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to carry himself away from his foe, only to discover that he couldn't manage that either.

Belasco bent over him, his clawed fingers reaching for the X-Man's throat. "Farewell, Wagner," he said.

His body, steel though it was, aching from the pounding he was taking, fiery pain throbbing in his broken leg, Piotr swept his arm in an arc that hurled two demons across the nave. That left four more beating and ripping at him: a wrinkled brown hobgoblin, no taller than a child and thin as a stick, with a wedge-shaped head, and long, barbed talons on its oversized hands; a hulking thing with four arms, whose gray hide sweated clear drops of acid; a young female vampire with black lipstick and eye shadow, clad in tattered jeans and a leather jacket decorated with studs and clinking chains; and a scaly one-eyed monstrosity that was doing its best to beat the mutant's head in with the pointed end of a war hammer.

The goblin was so nimble that, up until now, Colossus hadn't been able to touch it. He faked a grab at the four-armed creature, then suddenly snatched for the smaller demon instead. At last his fingers closed about its waist, and he used it to bludgeon the other monster, sparing himself further contact with its corrosive coating.

The hobgoblin thrashed and squawked for a moment, but after the second blow, it hung broken and silent in his grasp. Another swing sent the gray demon tumbling backward, its tusks shattered and its snout flattened.

From the corner of his eye, Piotr glimpsed the war hammer hurtling down at him once more. Releasing the inert, flopping form of the goblin, he frantically jerked his head out of the way, and the weapon crunched into the floor. He lifted his arm to punch the one-eyed creature, but the vampire pounced on him and grabbed him by the wrist. Wrestling, they rolled across the floor.

Piotr knew the undead woman wasn't strong enough to hurt

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him physically, and by now, she must know it too. No doubt she hoped either to make eye contact and mesmerize him, or to hold him in place long enough for the demon to bash his brains out. Determined to deny her the opportunity to do either, the Russian dug the fingers of his free hand into the floor, ripped up a scrap of wood, and drove it into her back. She kept struggling, so he yanked it out and stabbed again. This time, he evidently pierced her heart, because she suddenly stopped moving, and the faint stink of her undead flesh intensified into a nauseating miasma.

The hammer streaked at Colossus. He used the rotting corpse in his hands as a shield, and the weapon thudded deep inside it. By jerking the body, he managed to rip the hammer from the one-eyed demon's hands.

Hissing, the creature scrambled backward. Evidently, despite its fangs and robust build, it was reluctant to fight Piotr empty handed. Tossing the vampire's corpse, that was now little more than bones and slime, across the church, the mutant looked around for his next attacker. He was sure there'd be one. No matter how many monsters he defeated, they just kept coming at him, with no letup at all.

But now, they didn't. Rather, they hovered out of his reach. He wondered if his fierce defense had finally thrown a scare into them, if they'd keep their distance while he crawled to the altar. Then he noticed that the structure of lights above his head was pulsing brighter and brighter, and sensed that somewhere a portal was beginning to open.

The demons weren't hanging back because they were too afraid to face him but because they thought they'd already won. They knew Piotr couldn't drag himself all the way to Belasco in the seconds remaining. Why, then, should they endanger themselves any further? In another minute, the Dark Ones themselves would no doubt destroy Colossus and his teammates.

In the desecrated, smoke-filled apse, fighting furiously but

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uselessly, Kurt leapt and teleported around and around Belasco. A somersault left him facing in Piotr's direction, his yellow eyes narrowed, and the steel man realized that his friend had observed that, though injured, he was presently in the clear.

Nightcrawler displaced himself three more times, so quickly that the muffled bangs nearly merged into one report. Then, materializing in front of Belasco, spinning his saber in a circle, he twirled the phosphorescent sword from the magician's hand.

An instant later, Belasco dropped the blue-furred mutant with a blaze of sorcery. But by then, the enchanted sword was tumbling through the air straight toward Piotr, and judging from the way its owner was still oriented on Kurt, he didn't realize that the other X-Man was now in a position to make use of it.

Unfortunately, the one-eyed demon did recognize the danger. Dashing forward, it snatched the weapon from the air.

Heedless of the flare of agony the lurching motion produced in his broken leg, Colossus hurled himself forward, grabbed the creature's shank just above its cloven hoof, and yanked it down to the floor. He reared above it, pummeled it until it stopped struggling, then ripped the sword from its grasp. His skin crawled at the weapon's touch.

Turning back toward the dais at the front of the church, he saw Belasco reaching for Kurt's throat. Gripping the sword part way down the blade, as if it were a javelin, Piotr threw it with all his strength.

Some of the demons bellowed or howled a warning. Alarmed at last, Belasco pivoted and began to mouth a word of power. Too late. The sword plunged into his breast, twelve inches of the gory blade shooting from his back.

His face a mask of agony and disbelief, Belasco reeled backward, and a corona of crackling black flame engulfed his

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body. In another instant, it consumed him utterly, not leaving so much as a wisp of ash behind.

The floating construct of light blinked out of existence. Piotr felt the silent crash as the gate to the Dark Ones' prison slammed shut. He thought he sensed a vast chorus of alien voices screaming and roaring in frustration, but perhaps that was only his imagination.

Across the church, demons simply faded away. Maybe, with Belasco gone, nothing anchored them to the material world, or maybe, now that the Elder Gods wouldn't be returning after all, they simply saw no reason to remain. If any of Dracula's progeny had even survived the battle, they were apparently now slinking away as well. They certainly weren't attacking the X-Men any further.

Piotr shuddered in the grip of a savage exultation, and tears slipped from his metal eyes. But in a moment, far sooner than he might have expected, the emotion passed, and he remembered he had teammates who were down. Wiping his face, he looked up at Kurt. "Are you all right?"

"Belasco paralyzed me," gritted Nightcrawler, laboring to articulate the words, "but the effect is passing. Nice teamwork, *mein freund*. Are you well?"

"A broken leg," said Piotr. "A few burns. It will all heal. How did you know Belasco's own sword could hurt him?"

"I didn't," Kurt admitted. "But I could tell it was magic, and I knew *my* weapon wasn't cutting him. How are the others? I can't quite lift my head yet to look for myself."

Gingerly, now far more conscious of his aches and pains, Piotr hauled himself around to check.

Cyclops was kneeling beside the still-motionless Phoenix and Rogue, and the just-starting-to-stir Wolverine. After a moment, he grinned a most uncharacteristic grin. "They're all alive!" he shouted.

"Thank the Goddess," panted Ororo, slumping back in her corner.

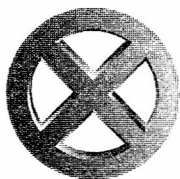
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In the vestibule, Amanda crumpled to one knee, but it looked to Piotr as if she wasn't wounded, just exhausted. Disciplined martial artist that she was, Kitty didn't permit herself to display her fatigue to the same degree, but, breathing deeply, she leaned heavily on a spear. In contrast, unbruised and unbloodied, Dracula stood as straight and moved as lithely as ever, with only his ragged clothing to show that he'd just emerged from a battle.

"Everyone is all right," said Piotr to Kurt.

"Is it really over?" asked Kitty of the company at large.

"It is indeed," said Dracula with a smile. "The war is won, and it's time to claim the spoils. A bride for me, and a throne and eternal life for Ororo." Turning toward the windrider, he held out his pallid hand.



CHAPTER 16



Ororo's mouth turned dry with fear. She was no match for Dracula now. She'd never fully recovered her strength since Rogue had drained her, and the battle had all but exhausted her powers. She doubted she could even run away. At the moment, the vampire could almost certainly fly faster than she could.

"No!" Kitty cried, sounding very young. "You promised to be our ally!"

"Only until we defeated Belasco," Dracula replied, "and happily, that has now come to pass."

Shadowcat leveled her spear, bellowed a *kiai*, and thrust the weapon at his chest. With literally inhuman speed, the vampire sidestepped the attack, grabbed Kitty with one hand, and slapped her with the other. The mutant hung limp in his grasp.

Scott lurched to his feet and, hobbling forward, peppered Dracula with optic blasts. The scarlet rays were feeble compared to those Cyclops could fire when he was at full power. They didn't even jolt the vampire backward.

Sneering, Dracula threw the unconscious Shadowcat into Scott, and the two X-Men wound up in a tangled heap on the floor.

Kurt still seemed to be paralyzed, and Amanda was wheezing on her knees. Jean and Rogue were still unconscious, and Wolverine was only just starting to stir. Piotr had somehow risen and was laboriously hopping forward, each hop twisting his features with pain, but Ororo could tell that he'd never cover the length of the church in time to help her, nor, crippled, would he pose a threat to Dracula even if he did. For the moment, she was on her own.

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So be it then. Thrusting dread from her mind, she mustered what little remained of her powers, then hurled her most powerful lightning. The dazzling white bolt made Dracula thrash in place while a deafening thunderclap shook the church, shattering several of the stained-glass windows. When the discharge ended, he crumpled to the floor. For a moment, she dared to hope—but then, smiling, he flowed to his feet.

She had no more lightning with which to strike him, so she used the air, hitting him with one frigid blast after another, and, remembering the tactic she'd noticed Scott employing earlier, scooping up and throwing barrages of splintered wood. All to no avail. His head down, his ragged cloak fluttering behind him, Dracula impelled himself inexorably closer, until finally, no matter how she strained to keep it blowing, the wind too forsook her. Her strength exhausted, it took everything she had simply to stand straight and defiant, poised to at least punch at him once before the end.

"That's why I love you," said Dracula, his crimson eyes gleaming. "That indomitable spirit. You fought valiantly to the very last. But this time, you can't escape your destiny. Like these other mortals, you're battered and exhausted, while I am as strong as ever."

"You're forgettin' somethin'," a bass voice rasped.

Startled, Dracula pivoted.

"There's one X-Man who bounces back from a beating just as fast as you do," the voice continued. Grinning, Wolverine heaved himself up from the floor.

Too bad that cocky statement was a lie. Sure, Logan was gradually recovering from the mauling that last demon had given him before Cyke blasted it back to the netherworld. His wounds were closing, and his strength was trickling back. But he wasn't fully recovered, not by a long shot. He'd leaned on his healing factor heavily over the course of the day, and even his turbocharged metabolism had to slow down sometime.

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But when he'd woken to see Dracula closing in on Ororo, he'd known that his weakness and pain didn't matter. Nothing did, except keeping the leech away from his intended prey.

And so, drops of his blood spattering to the floor, Wolverine did his best to mask the wave of dizziness that momentarily assailed him. If Dracula realized how rocky he was, he might decide simply to snatch up Storm and dash from the church, and the Canadian was far from sure that he could sprint fast enough to cut him off. He needed the creature in black to believe that the only way out was through him. Or else to want to kill him so badly that he was even willing to delay the pleasure of transforming Ororo to do it. Either way, to stand and fight.

"Come on, dead man," Logan said, sneering. "We been wantin' a piece of one another all night, so let's dance. Or are you gonna back down again, like you did in the armory?"

Dracula smiled. "Some of your comrades may make me worthy servants, but I promise, animal, there will be no immortality for you. Only the corruption of the grave." One white hand held high and the other low in a skilled hand-to-hand combatant's guard, he slowly advanced on the smaller man. Studying one another, they began to circle.

Logan was grateful that the vampire hadn't tried to overwhelm him with an immediate charging attack. Every second that passed restored a bit more of his strength and coordination. When Dracula finally did pounce, hands outstretched and fangs bared, the X-Man managed to dodge, and to gash his opponent's flank with his right-hand claws.

The undead creature hissed in pain, but when Wolverine pulled his arm back, the ivory skin beneath the torn black clothing was unmarked. Turning, Dracula threw a head punch. Skipping backward, Logan met the blow with a sweep of his left-hand claws. The counterattack should have severed the vampire's hand at the wrist—indeed, Logan could feel his natural weaponry shearing through bone—but when his claws

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ripped free, the appendage was still attached. Sneering, Dracula suddenly pivoted, surprising the mutant with a lightning-fast roundhouse kick that would have shattered any other man's ribs. As it was, it drove the air from Logan's lungs and hurled him into the wall. Half dazed with the shock of the two impacts, he barely managed to regain his balance in time to meet the vampire's follow-up attack.

As the two men fought on, Wolverine ducked, dodged, and blocked madly, doing his best to avoid another such Herculean blow. His unbreakable bones wouldn't be enough to keep him on his feet if an attack concussed him, or ruptured one of his internal organs. But he was even more concerned to keep Dracula from grappling him. If the leech got his fangs in him, he might well be able to seize control of his mind, depriving him of even the will to fight.

Meanwhile, the X-Man cut and stabbed relentlessly, many of his attacks variations on the *ko-dachi*, short sword techniques he'd mastered while studying *kenjutsu* in Japan. He concentrated on the lower part of Dracula's body, and gradually, the vampire's right hand, the one he was holding higher, began to creep down.

Which was what Logan wanted. Because, while he was no expert on the occult, after the X-Men's first encounter with Dracula, he'd done a little boning up on the undead. Enough to learn that, while most thrusts and cuts from his adamantium claws could do no more than slow his adversary down for an instant, if he could slice Dracula's head completely off with one blow, that would kill him sure enough.

Dracula jabbed at the mutant's face. Wolverine deflected the blow with an *otoshi-uke* dropping block, then instantly squatted, feinting a stab at the vampire's belly. Both of Dracula's hands dropped to defend, and at last his upper body was completely open. Springing into the air, Logan whipped his right-hand claws in an all-out *yokomen-uchi* side strike at the undead monarch's neck.

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If the X-Man had been fresh and unwounded, he would have been fast enough to pull the maneuver off. As it was, Dracula only barely snapped his left arm up in time to block. Wolverine's claws bit deep into flesh and bone, but at the same instant, the vampire's right fist tagged him with a solid up-percut to the jaw, a blow that knocked him to the floor. As he jumped back up, shaken, the taste of blood in his mouth, his eyes met Dracula's, and he faltered. After a moment, he realized he couldn't look away, or indeed, move at all.

"It's over, X-Man," Dracula said. "Sheathe your claws."

Logan obeyed, the blades retracting with a faint metallic *snakt*. For a moment, he didn't know why he shouldn't do whatever Dracula said. Indeed, his head was numb and empty of any thoughts at all.

Then the old berserker rage, the feral fury that all the years of therapy and Zen had never truly tamed, welled up inside him, painting the world bloodred and shattering Dracula's spell. Snarling, his claws leaping from their sockets, Logan hurled himself at the man in black.

Once again, he caught the bloodsucker by surprise, and came within a hair of slashing through his neck. But Dracula whirled aside and hammered him with a one-two combination, the first punch to the head and the second to the chest.

Logan went down once more, and this time, it was considerably harder to get up. His mouth was now full of blood, enough to choke him, which was perhaps the reason he couldn't catch his breath. Something throbbed inside his torso, while objects in his field of vision divided into two, flowed together once more, and wavered in and out of focus.

Leering, Dracula advanced again, and even the savage beast that Logan had become realized he was in desperate straits.

Though his actions were still fast and deadly enough to annihilate a host of ordinary combatants, Amanda could tell that Wolverine was on his last legs. And Piotr was still yards away

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from the fracas, not that it looked as if he was in any shape to do more than delay Logan's death by another instant anyway.

Which meant it was up to her to save her friends. At least, unlike everyone else, she hadn't sustained any physical punishment. Kurt, Shadowcat, and Dracula had protected her from that. Indeed, she'd caught her second wind. But the struggle to hold back Belasco's conjuration had virtually drained her reserves of magical power. What, then, could she do?

If she was lucky, one thing. The trick that, as the king of the undead had himself observed, she'd practiced so often that it came more easily than any other.

She waited until the next time Dracula turned his back to her, then waved her hand, trying to attract Logan's attention. The snarl on the mutant's face made him look as if he was sunk deep in a bestial frenzy, but even so, perhaps he saw her and divined her intent. Because he stopped dodging back and forth, and by standing his ground, kept his opponent facing in the right direction.

Amanda rose and ran at Dracula. Despite her attempt to move silently, the vampire sensed her approach, pivoted, and struck at her. She saw instantly that, charging forward as she was, she was going to lunge straight into the blow.

Wolverine bellowed and smashed a side-thrust kick to Dracula's midsection. The attack rocked the vampire slightly off balance, and his hand missed Amanda by an inch. Plunging on, she threw her arms around him and tried to teleport.

She and the vampire remained in place while his hands gripped her neck and, his long nails cutting her, jerked her off her feet like a hangman's noose. Thrashing futilely, already feeling as if she were starved for air, she feared that she'd overestimated her sorcery. Then her sluggish power finally responded to her will. The gloom of the benighted church gave way to dazzling glare.

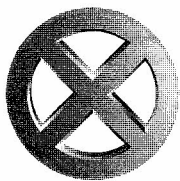
Dracula screamed and dropped her in the sand. Instinctively

she scrambled away from him through the dry, superheated air. Squinting, she discerned that her magic had brought her precisely where she'd wanted to go. Above her, the sun blazed in a cloudless sky, while the beige dunes of the Sahara rolled away endlessly in all directions, with never a rocky outcropping or a tree to create a patch of shade.

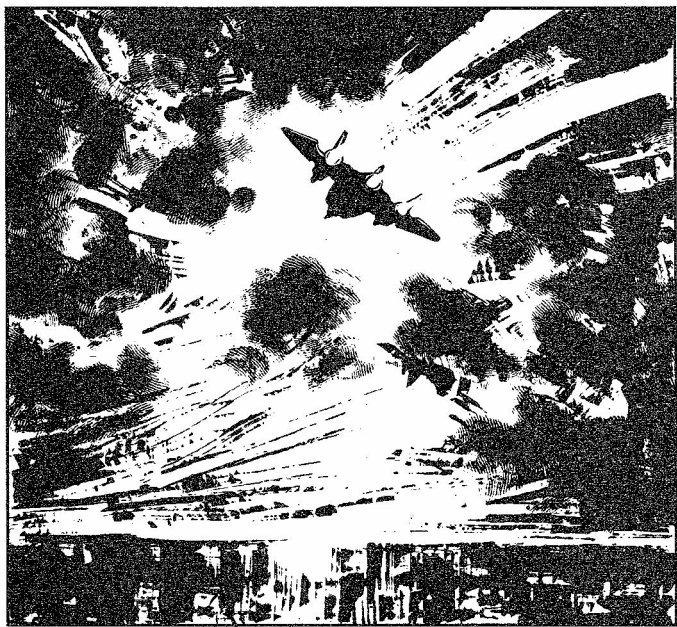
Dropping to one knee, Dracula frantically tried to cover himself with his shredded cloak. It didn't help much. Amanda stared in horrified fascination as pale, crackling flame danced on his body, quickly spreading to his inky garments as well, and a dark, foul-smelling smoke arose from his immolation.

Possibly recognizing that his attempt to shield himself was merely protracting his agony, the vampire abruptly lurched to his feet and allowed his mantle to fall away from his head. Amanda gasped at the blackened, shriveled, still-burning ruin his face had become. Somehow orienting on her even though his eyes had melted in their sockets, Dracula staggered toward her with crumbling hands extended.

Even in his death throes, he could still be dangerous. She dredged up the strength for one final teleport and left him to his fate.



CHAPTER 17



Rogue stared down at Jean, who still lay motionless on the floor, now with her fellow X-Man's tattered brown jacket folded beneath her head. Of them all, the auburn-haired telepath was the last to recover consciousness. Scott sat beside her, holding her hand, while everyone else hovered in the general vicinity.

"Come on," Rogue groaned.

Ororo put her hand on her shoulder. "Patience, my friend. She's alive. She'll be all right."

But Rogue knew that wasn't necessarily so. After she'd drained him, Cody had never woken, and Carol Danvers had come back damaged. If she'd hurt Jean, when the telepath had risked everything to help her—

"I can feel her mind stirring!" Scott exclaimed. Rogue felt a surge of joy, and Kitty let out a cheer.

Jean's lustrous green eyes opened, then moved back and forth, taking in the circle of teammates peering down at her. "Wow," she said, her voice so feeble that it was almost inaudible, "you people look awful."

Logan grinned. "Like they say, Red, you oughtta see the other guys. After you helped Rogue kick the Dark Ones out of her head, Kurt and Piotr stuck a sword through Belasco and lit him on fire. Then, when Dracula turned on us, Amanda teleported him to the other side of the world, where the sun's shining, and of course that torched him too. We've had ourselves a regular supernatural barbecue."

"You all right, Jean?" asked Rogue.

"I'm fine," Phoenix replied. "Just tired and sore. Like everyone else is, I'm sure."

"Thank God," Rogue said, blinking back tears. "I'll never

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forget what you did for me.” She looked around at the others. “All of you.”

“It’s part of the package,” said Wolverine. “You’ve saved our butts plenty of times.”

“But you did it for me after I nearly murdered one of our own,” said Rogue. She turned to Ororo. “Can you ever forgive me?”

The windrider smiled. “As if you even need to ask.”

“We’ll rest for another ten minutes,” said Scott, “then retrieve Laurel’s car and head back to the *Blackbird* and the Cessna. We can radio Major Jones to tell her the crisis is over after we’re in the air. The shape we’re in, I don’t want to give her a second chance to take us into custody.”

“When the dust settles,” said Kurt, his yellow eyes gleaming, “do you think anyone will believe that the entire world was actually in danger, or that the X-Men saved the day?”

“The Professor might be disappointed in me for saying this,” Cyclops answered, “but right now, I couldn’t care less. I just want to go home.”

Logan had noticed that, even though Piotr had watched over the unconscious Jean as anxiously as his teammates, he had nonetheless sat a little apart, on the one of the few pews that the battle hadn’t shattered. He was still there now, his body made of ordinary flesh once more, his broken leg immobilized by an improvised splint, and a pensive, troubled expression on his wide, square-jawed, handsome face.

His half-healed cuts and bruises twinging, Wolverine hobbled over to the Russian. “How do you like the taste of revenge?” the short man asked.

Piotr smiled ruefully. “I was . . . ecstatic to throw the sword through Belasco. I suppose I still am happy I did it. But I don’t like the person I became tonight, eaten up with rage and hate. I’m ashamed of that man, and I don’t want to turn into him ever again.”

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Logan extracted the pack of cheroots from his belt. "From your expression, I had a hunch you were worryin' about something like that. If I were you, I wouldn't sweat it. Take it from a guy with a real talent for 'rage and hate,' you ain't the type. Now that you've gotten even with Belasco for hurting Illyana, you'll go back to bein' your old self, helping old ladies across the street and painting your pictures, so decent and sensitive that it makes the rest of us want to puke."

Colossus chuckled. "I hope so. At any rate, at least I now feel as if I belong among the X-Men. Ever since I abandoned you to join Magneto, I've worried that I could never truly be welcome again."

Logan snorted. "Told you you'd switch back to normal. Already you're talkin' like a simp."

Both men shared a welcome laugh at that.

Kurt took Amanda by the hand and led her away from the others, into a shadowy corner of the dilapidated church. It could be terrifying to go into deadly peril alongside the love of his life, but occasionally there were compensations as well. He could begin celebrating his victories immediately.

Nightcrawler kissed the Gypsy passionately. Exhilaration sang along his nerves. When at last they paused for breath, he whispered, "I knew you could do your part to stop Belasco. Without accepting Dracula's tainted gift."

"Were you really sure?" she murmured back. "Or were you simply hoping?"

The mutant opened his mouth to answer glibly, then sensing that she genuinely wished to know, responded with the truth instead. "To be honest," he said, "over the course of the last several hours, I've had my doubts about a great many things. Which isn't like me. But there were aspects of this mission that made me fear that we all might be flawed and inadequate to the challenge, myself most of all."

"I know what you mean," Amanda said. "I think that at

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certain moments everybody felt that way, even Wolverine. It seemed as if Belasco and Dracula were so powerful and clever, so far ahead of us every step of the way, that they could manipulate us like pawns on a chessboard." She smiled. "But I don't imagine anyone feels that anymore."

"You can rest assured, I don't. I feel like Errol Flynn. Invincible and amorous." He pressed his lips to hers.

A few seconds later, she jumped and squealed. "Watch the tail!" she said, giving his chest a playful slap. "At least until we're really alone."

Scott was still weary and aching right down to his bones, and was sure that everyone else felt the same. But the sooner they all got safely out of Natchez, and availed themselves of the medical resources in the mansion, the better off they'd be. Holding Jean's hands, smiling into her bruised and scraped but still lovely features, he asked her, *Ready?*

More or less, she replied.

With a grunt, slightly surprised at just how quickly he was stiffening up, he rose from their fragment of broken pew, then helped her up and put his arm around her. "Time to go, people!" he called.

The X-Men headed for the vestibule. Her shoulder banded, Kitty walked with the black-pointed spear as if it were a staff, the butt thumping on the floor. Piotr limped along with one arm draped over Rogue's shoulders and the other encircling Nightcrawler's.

Suddenly Ororo stopped in her tracks. "Look at that!"

"What?" demanded Shadowcat, pivoting and peering about, searching for some new threat.

"The weather," said Storm, beaming and gesturing at the open doors. "The rain's stopping. There isn't going to be a flood."

As they all stepped out under the open sky, Scott saw that she was unquestionably correct. The masses of thunderheads

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were breaking up, revealing the beginnings of a pink and golden dawn.

Logan exhaled a plume of pungent smoke. "Looks like it could turn out to be a pretty day," he said.

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